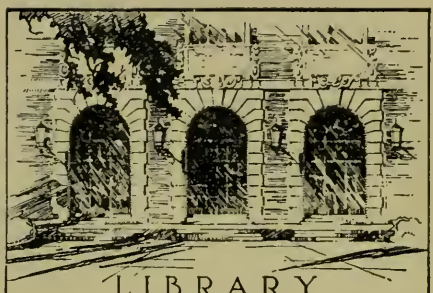

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WORMWOOD.

A DRAMA OF PARIS.

WORMWOOD

A DRAMA OF PARIS.

BY

MARIE CORELLI,

AUTHOR OF
"ARDATH: THE STORY OF A DEAD SELF," "VENDETTA!"
"A ROMANCE OF TWO WORLDS," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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"And the name of the star is called WORMWOOD: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter."—REVELATION viii. 11.

"Et le nom de cette étoile était ABSINTHE: et la troisième partie des eaux fut changée en absinthe; et elles firent mourir un grand nombre d'hommes parce qu'elles étaient devenues amères."—REVELATION viii. 11 (*Nouveau Testament Français*).

WORMWOOD.

I.

Pausing for a moment, while the pavement rocked unsteadily beneath me, I tried to shape some course of immediate action, but found that impossible. To return to my own rooms and endeavour to rest was an idea that never occurred to me; rest and I were strangers to each other. I could not grasp at any distinct fact or thought,—I had become for the time being, a mere beast, with every animal instinct in me awake and rampant. Intelligence, culture, scholarship, —these seemed lost to me,—they occupied no place in my drugged memory. Nothing

is easier than for a man to forget such things. A brute by origin, he returns to his brute nature willingly. And I,—I did not stand long considering, or striving to consider my own condition there where I was, close by the Avenue de l'Opèra, with the stream of passers-by coming and going like grinning ghosts in a dream,—I hurled myself, as it were, full into the throng and let myself drift with it, careless of whither I went. There were odd noises in my ears,—ringing of bells, beating and crashing of hammers,—it seemed to my fancy that there, spread out before me was a clear green piece of water with a great ship upon it;—the ship was in process of building, and I heard the finishing blows on her iron keel,—the throbbing sound of her panting engines;—I saw her launched, when lo!—her giant bulk split apart like a sundered orange—and there, down among her sinking timbers lay a laughing naked thing with pale amber hair, and white arms entwined round a livid corpse that crumbled into a skeleton as I

looked,—and anon, from a skeleton into dust! All the work of my Absinthe-witch! —her magic lantern of strange pictures was never exhausted! I rambled on and on—heedless of the people about me,—eager for some distraction and almost unconscious that I moved,—but burning with a sort of rapturous rage to the finger-tips,—a sensation that would easily have prompted and persuaded me to any deed of outrage or violence. Mark me here, good reader, whosoever you are!—do not imagine for a moment that my character is an uncommon one in Paris! Not by any means! The streets are full of such as I am,—men, who, reeling home in the *furia* of Absinthe, will not stop to consider the enormity of any crime,—human wolves who would kill you as soon as look at you, or kill themselves just as the fancy takes them,—men who would ensnare the merest child in woman's shape, and not only outrage her, but murder and mutilate her afterwards,—and then, when all is done, and they are by some

happy accident, caught and condemned for the crime, will smoke a cigar on the way to the guillotine and cut a joke with the executioner as the knife descends! You would rather not know all this perhaps?—you would rather shut your eyes to the terrific tragedy of modern life and only see that orderly commonplace surface part of it which does not alarm you or shock your nerves? I dare say!—just as you would rather not remember that you must die! But why all this pretence?—why keep up such a game of Sham? Paris is described as a brilliant centre of civilization,—but it is the civilization of the organ-grinder's monkey, who is trained to wear coat and hat, do a few agile tricks, grab at money, crack nuts, and fastidiously examine the insect-parasites of his own skin. It is not a shade near the civilization of old Rome or Athens,—nor does it even distantly resemble that of Nineveh or Babylon. In those age-buried cities,—if we may credit historical records,—men believed in the dignity of

manhood, and did their best to still further ennoble it;—but we in our day are so thoroughly alive to our own ridiculousness generally, that we spare neither time nor trouble in impressing ourselves with the fact. And so our most successful books are those which make sport of, and find excuse for, our vices,—our most paying dramas those which expose our criminalities in such a manner as to just sheer off by a hair's breadth positive indecency,—our most popular preachers and orators those which have most rant and most hypocrisy. And so we whirl along from hour to hour,—and the heavens do not crack, and no divine thunderbolt slays us for our misdeeds—if they *are* misdeeds! Assuredly the Greek Zeus was a far more interesting Deity than the present strange Immensity of Eternal Silence, in which some people perchance feel the thought-throbbings of a vast Force which broods and broods and waits,—waits maybe for a fixed appointed time when the whole universe as it now is, shall disperse

like a fleece of film, and leave space clear and clean for the working out of another Creation!

As I tell you, if I had wanted money that night, I would have murdered even an aged and feeble man to obtain it! If I had wanted love,—or what is *called* love in Paris, I would have won it, either by flattery or force. But I needed neither gold nor woman's kisses,—of the first I still had sufficient,—of the second, why!—in Paris they can always be secured at the cost of a few napoleons and a champagne supper. No!—I wanted something that gold could not buy nor woman's lips persuade,—Forgetfulness!—and it enraged me to think that this was the one, the only thing that my Absinthe-witch would not give me in all its completeness. Some drinkers of the Green Elixir there are who can win this boon,—they sink into an apathy that approaches idiotism, as the famous Dr. Charcot will tell you,—they almost forget that they live. Why could not *I* do this? Why

could I not strike into fragments at one blow, as it were, this burning, reflecting, quivering dial-plate of memory that seared and scorched my brain? Aimlessly hurrying on as though bound on some swift errand, yet without any definite object in view, I arrived all at once in front of a gateway over which a garish arch of electric light flashed its wavering red, blue, and green,—a sort of turnstile wicket marked the side-entrance, with an inscription above it in large letters—"BAL MASQUÉ! ENTREÉ LIBRE!!" There are plenty of such places in Paris of course, though I had never set foot in one of them,—dancing-saloons of the lowest type where the "Entrée Libre" is merely held out as a bait to attract a large and mixed attendance. Once inside, everything has to be paid for,—that is always understood. It is the same rule with all the *cafés chantants*—one enters *gratis*,—but one pays for *having* entered. The sound of music reached me where I stood,—wild, harsh music such as devils might dance to,

—and without taking a second's thought about it,—for I could not think,—I twisted the bars of the turnstile violently and rushed in,—into the midst of a hurly-burly such as no painter's brush has ever dared devise,—a scene that could not be witnessed anywhere save in "civilized" Paris. In a long *salle*, tawdry with bright paint and common gilding, whirled a crowd of men and women fantastically attired in all sorts of motley costumes,—some as clowns, others as sheeted corpses,—others as laundresses, fishermen, sailors, soldiers, *vivandières*,—here was a strutting caricature of Boulanger,—there an exaggerated double of the President of the Republic;—altogether a wild and furious crew, shrieking, howling, and dancing like lunatics just escaped from detention. Some few wore masks and dominos,—but the greater part of the assemblage were unmasked,—and my entrance, clad merely as a plain civilian, excited no sort of notice. I was to the full as *de rigueur* for such an entertainment as

any one else present. I flung myself into the midst of the gesticulating, gabbling vortex of people with a sense of pleasure at being surrounded by so much noise and movement,—here not a soul could know me,—here no unpleasant thought or fanciful impression would have time to write itself across my brain,—here it was better than being in a wilderness,—one could yell and scream and caper with the rest of one's fellow-apes and be as merry as one chose! I elbowed my way along, and promised an officious but very dirty waiter my custom presently,—and while I tried to urge my muddled intelligence into a clearer comprehension of all that was going on, the crowd suddenly parted asunder with laughter and shouts of applause, and standing back in closely pressed ranks made an open space in their centre for the approach of two women discreetly masked,—one arrayed in very short black gauze skirts, the other in blood-red. Attitudinizing for a moment in that theatrical *pose* which all dancers

assume before commencing their evolutions, they uttered a peculiar shout, half savage, half mirthful,—a noisy burst of music answered them,—and then, with an indescribable slide forward and an impudent bracing of the arms akimbo, they started the "*can-can*,"—which though immodest, vile, vulgar, and licentious, has perhaps more power to inflame the passions of a Paris mob than the chanting of the 'Marseillaise.' It can be danced in various ways, this curious fandango of threatening gesture and amorous invitation,—and if the dancers be a couple of heavy Paris laundresses or *pétroleuses*, it will probably be rendered so ridiculously as to be harmless. But, danced by women with lithe, strong, sinuous limbs, —with arms that twist like the bodies of snakes,—with bosoms that seem to heave with suppressed rage and ferocity,—with eyes that flash hell-fire through the black eye-holes of a conspirator-like mask,—and with utter, reckless, audacious disregard of all pretence at modesty,—its effect is terri-

ble, enraging!—inciting to deeds of rapine, pillage, and slaughter! And why? Why, in Heaven's name, should a mere dance make men mad? Why?—Mild questioner, whoever you are, I cannot answer you! Why are men made as they are?—will you tell me that? Why does an English Earl marry a music-hall singer? He has seen her in tights,—he has heard her roar forth vulgar ditties to the lowest classes of the public,—and yet he has been known to marry her, and make her "my lady"—and a peeress of the realm! Explain to me this incongruity,—and I will explain to you then why it is that the sight of the "*can-can*" danced in all its frankness, turns Parisian men for the time being, into screeching, stamping maniacs, whom to see, to hear, to realize the existence of, is to feel that with all our 'culture,' we are removed only half a step away from absolute barbarism! On me, the spectacle of those two strong women, the one wearing the colour of the grave, the other the colour of blood, acted

as a sort of exhilarating charm,—and I howled, stamped, shrieked, and applauded as furiously as the rest of the onlookers. More than this, when the dance was over, I approached the black siren and besought her to honour me with her hand in a waltz, —an invitation which I accompanied by a whisper in her ear—a whisper that had in it the chink of base coin rather than the silvery ring of courtly homage,—she had her price of course, like all the women there, and that price I paid. I whirled her several times round the room—for she waltzed well,—and finally, sitting down by her side, asked her, or rather I should say commanded her, as I was paymaster for the evening, to remove her mask. She did so, — and displayed a handsome coarse visage,—badly rouged, and whitened with pearl powder,—her way of life had rendered her old before her time,—but the youth and wickedness in her magnificent eyes made amends for her premature wrinkles.

"Tiens Madame! Comme tu es laide!"

I said with brusque candour. "Mais c'est une jolie laideur!"

She laughed harshly.

"Oui! je suis laide—je le sais!" she responded indifferently. "Que veux-tu, mon jeune farouche? *J'ai vécu!*"

It was my turn to laugh now, and I did so uproariously. She had *lived*—she! She thought so, in all good faith,—she believed she knew life inside and out, and all through. She, who had probably never opened a noble book or looked at a fine picture,—she, who would certainly have no eyes for scenery or the wonder and science of Nature,—she, whose experience had been limited to the knowledge of the most despicable side of despicable men's characters;—she had *lived*, which was tantamount to saying that she comprehended the object and intention of living! What a fool she was!—what a shallow-brained fool!—and yet, it is for such women as she was, that men occasionally ruin themselves and their families. The painted successful wanton of the stage

never lacks diamonds or flowers,—the honest wife and mother often lacks bread! Such is the world and the life of the world,—and God does nothing to improve it. What an impassively dumb spectator of things He is in His vast, clear empyrean! Why does He not "rend the heavens and come down"—as the old Psalmist implored Him to do,—then we should understand,—we should not have to wait for death to teach us. And the question is, *will* death teach us? Is death a silence, or an overpoweringly precise explanation? Ah!—At present, not knowing, we laugh at the idea,—but—it is a laugh with a shudder in it!

Well! I danced again and yet again with the female fiend who had "lived," as she said,—I gave her champagne, ices, bonbons,—all that her greedy appetite demanded, and I watched her with a certain vague amusement, as she ate and drank and laughed and jested, while the wine flushed her cheeks and lent an extra devilish sparkle to her eyes. Between the

dances, we sat together in a sort of retired alcove adorned with soiled hangings of faded crimson, and at the next table to us, in a similar kind of compartment, were a clown and a harlequin,—the clown a man, the harlequin a woman. These two were noisily drunk—and they sang scraps of song, whistled and screeched alternately, the female harlequin sometimes beating her sword of lath against her knees, and anon laying it with a resonant "crack!" across her grinning companion's shoulders. Half stupefied myself, and too confused in mind to understand even my own actions, I stared at this pair of fools disporting themselves much as I might have stared at a couple of dancing bears in a menagerie—and then growing suddenly tired of their rough antics, my eyes wandered from them down and across the length and breadth of the *salle,* where the vari-coloured crowd still twirled and flitted and swung to and fro, like a merry-go-round of puppets at a fair. And then I perceived a new figure in the

throng,—a stranger in black, who looked curiously out of place and incongruous, so I fancied,—and I turned to my siren of the "can-can," who with both her muscular white arms folded on the table, was staring hard at me with, as I thought, an expression of intense inquisitiveness, not unmixed with fear.

"*Voilà!*" I said laughing. "A priest at a *bal masqué!* Does he not look droll? See what temptations these gentlemen of the Church yield to!"

She turned her black eyes in the direction I indicated.

"What priest?" she asked. "Where?"

"There!

And I pointed straight before me into the *salle*, where I plainly saw the individual I meant,—a man, wearing the closely buttoned-up clerical black garment I had learned to abominate so heartily.

"I do not see him!" she said. "No real priest would dare to come here, I fancy! Some one in priest's clothes perhaps—

dressed up for fun—yes!—that is very likely. A priest is always ridiculous! Find him, and I will dance with him!"

I laughed again, and flipped her on the bare arm that lay nearest to me.

"You will be a fool if you do!" I told her carelessly. "He will have no money for you, and you have had enough champagne. *There* he is!—there, with his back turned to us! Don't you see him now?"

She stared and stared,—then shrugged her shoulders.

"No!"

A sudden horrible fear froze my blood. I sprang up from my seat.

"Come!" I said hoarsely. "Come!—Quick!—Give me another dance and dance your best!"

I snatched her round the waist, and whirled her into the throng with so much celerity and violence that she nearly lost her footing and fell—but I cared little for that,—I plunged madly with her through the room and straight up to the spot where

that priest was standing—standing quite still.

"Look,—look!" I whispered. "You can see him plainly enough!—I told you he was a priest, and I was right! Look!—he does not move!"

Under her rouge her face grew very pale. "*Où donc?*" she murmured nervously. "*Je ne vois rien!*"

Closer and closer we waltzed towards that motionless shape of man, and I saw the dark outlines of his figure more and more distinctly.

"You can touch him now!" I said, my voice shaking as I spoke. "Your dress brushes against him!—what!—have you no eyes!—Ah, *diable!*"—and I uttered a furious cry as the figure turned its face upon me. Silvion Guidèl again, by all the Furies of fact or fiction!—Silvion Guidèl! . . . And this time, as I looked, he moved away rapidly, and began to slip stealthily through the crowd;—roughly flinging my partner from me I followed fast, striking

out right and left with my two hands to force a passage between the foolish flocks of dancing masqueraders,—I heard shrieks of terror and amazement,—loud shouts of "*Il est fou!—il est fou!*"—but I heeded nothing—nothing, save that black figure gliding swiftly on before me,—nothing until in my wild headlong rush I was stopped by the sudden consciousness of being in the fresh air. The wind blew coldly on my face,—I saw the moonlight falling in wide patterns around me,—but—was I alone? No!—for Silvion Guidèl stood there also, by the side of a great tree that spread its huge boughs downwards to the ground,—he gazed straight at me with wistful, beautiful, impassioned eyes,—but no smile crossed the quiet pallor of his countenance. He looked—yes!—exactly as he had looked before I murdered him! . . . Perhaps—perhaps, I thought vaguely—there was some mistake?—perhaps I had not killed him after all!—he *seemed* still to be alive!

"Silvion!" I whispered. "What now? —Silvion!"

A light breeze rustled the branches overhead,—the moonbeams appeared to gather and melt into a silvery sea—and I sprang forward, resolvedly intent on grasping that substantial-looking form in such a manner as to establish for myself the fact of its actual existence,—it rose upward from my touch like a cloud of ascending smoke and vanished utterly! . . . while I, striking my forehead sharply against the rough trunk of the tree where the accursëd phantom of my own brain had confronted me, fell heavily forward on the ground, stunned and insensible!

II.

I LAY there in a dead stupor for some hours,—but I was roused to my senses at last by the ungentle attentions of a *gendarme*, who grasped and shook me to and fro as if I were a bag of wheat.

"*Lêve-toi!* Get up, beast!" he growled, his rough provincial accent making the smooth French tongue sound like the ugly snarl of a savage bull-dog. "Drunk at nine in the morning! A pretty way of earning the right to live!"

I struggled to my feet and stared haughtily at him.

"I am a gentleman!" I said. "Leave me alone!"

The fellow burst out laughing.

"A gentleman! Truly, that is easily seen! One of the old aristocracy doubtless!"

And he picked up my hat,—it was entirely battered in on one side,—and handed it to me with a derisive bow.

I looked at him as steadily as I could,—everything seemed to flicker and dance to and fro before my eyes,—but I remembered I had some money left in my pockets. I searched,—and drew out a piece of twenty francs.

"What do you know about gentlemen or aristocrats?" I said. "Do you not measure them all by this?"—and I held up the gold coin—"You called me a beast,—what a mistake that was! A drunken beggar is a beast if you like, but a *grand seigneur* who amuses himself!" here I dropped the piece into his quickly outstretched palm—"*C'est autre chose, n'est-ce pas, mon ami?*"

He touched his hat,—and the laughter was all on my side now! He looked such a ridiculous puppet of officialism!

"*Mais oui, monsieur!—mais oui!*" he

murmured confusedly, pocketing his gold. "*Mille pardons! . . . c'est le devoir,—vous le savez! . . . Enfin—monsieur, j'ai l'honneur de vous saluer!*"

And he edged himself away with as much dignity as was possible in the very undignified position he occupied,—namely that of taking money to prove a beast a gentleman! His first exclamation at sight of me was honest, and *true*,—my condition was worse than bestial, for beasts never fall so low as men,—and *he* knew it and *I* knew it! But for twenty francs he could be made to say, —"*Monsieur, j'ai l'honneur de vous saluer!*" Poor devil!—Only one out of thousands like him in this droll world where there is so much bombastic prating about Duty and Honour!

Nine o'clock in the morning! So late as that!—I looked about me, and realized that I was close to the Champs Elysées; I could not imagine how I had come there, nor could I remember precisely where I had been during the past night. I was aware of a

deadly sense of sickness, and I was very unsteady on my feet, so that I was obliged to walk slowly. My hat was damaged beyond repair,—I put it on as it was, all crushed and beaten in,—and what with my soiled linen, disordered garments and unkempt hair, I felt that my appearance was not, on this fine bright morning in Paris, altogether prepossessing. But what did I care for that?—Who was to see me?—who was to know me? Humming the scrap of a tune under my breath I sauntered giddily along,—but the horrible sickness upon me increased with every step I took, and finally I determined to sit down for a while, and try to recover a firmer hold of my physical faculties. I staggered blindly towards a bench under the trees, and almost fell upon it, thereby knocking heavily against an upright dignified-looking old gentleman who just then happened to cross my path, and to whom I feebly muttered a word or two by way of apology. But the loud cry he gave startled me into a wide-awake condition

more successfully than any cold *douche* of water could have done.

"Gaston!—My God! *Gaston!*"

I stared stupidly at him with eyes that blinked painfully in the spring sunshine,—who was he, this tidy, respectable, elderly personage who, pale as death, regarded me with the terror-stricken air of one who sees some sudden spectral prodigy?

"Gaston!" he cried again.

Ah!—Of course! I knew him now! My father! Actually my father!—who would have thought it! I felt in a dim sort of way that I had no further claim to relationship with this worthy piece of honesty,—and I laughed drowsily as I made a feeble clutch at my battered hat and pulled it off to salute him.

"*Pardieu!*" I murmured. "This is an unexpected meeting, *mon père?* I rejoice to see you looking so well!"

White to the lips, he still stood, staring at me, one hand grasping his gold-headed cane,—the other nervously clenching and

unclenching itself. Had I had any sense of filial compassion or decency left, which I had not, I should have understood that the old man was suffering acutely from such a severe shock as needed all his physical courage and endurance to battle against, and I should have been as sorry for him as I ought; but in the condition I was, I only felt a kind of grim amusement to think what a horrible disappointment I must be to him! His son! *I!* I laughed again in a stupid sort of fashion, and surveying my ill-used hat I remarked airily—

"My presence in Paris must be a surprise to you, sir? I suppose you thought I was in Italy?"

He paid no attention to my words. He seemed quite stunned. Suddenly, rousing his faculties, as it were by a supreme effort, he made a stride towards me.

"Gaston!" he exclaimed sharply, "What does this mean? Why are you here? What has happened to you? Why have you never written to me?—what is the reason

of this disgraceful plight in which I find you? *Mon Dieu!*—what have I done to deserve this shame!"

His voice shook,—and his wrath seemed close upon the verge of tears.

"What have you done, *mon père?*—why nothing!" I responded tranquilly. "Nothing, I assure you! And why talk of shame? No shame attaches to you in the very least! Pray do not distress yourself! You ask me a great many questions,—and as I am not particularly well this morning——"

His face softened and changed in an instant, and he advanced another step or two hurriedly.

"Ah!—you are ill!—you have been suffering and have never told me of it," he said, with a sort of eager relief and solicitude. "Is it indeed so, my poor Gaston?—why then, forgive my hastiness!—here,—lean on my arm and let me take you home!"

A great lump rose in my throat,—what

a good simple old fellow he was,—this far-away half-forgotten individual to whom I dimly understood I owed my being! He was ready to offer me his arm,—he, the cleanly respectable honourable banker whose methodical regularity of habits and almost fastidious punctilio were known to all his friends and acquaintance,—he would,—if I had made illness my sole excuse,—he would have actually escorted my draggled, dirty, slouching figure through the streets with more than the tenderness of the Good Samaritan! I!—a *murderer!*—I smiled,—his simplicity was too sincere to merit any further deception from me.

"You mistake!" I said, speaking harshly and with difficulty. "I am not ill,—not with the sort of illness that you or any one else could cure. I've been up all night,—dancing all night,—drunk all night,—going to the devil all night!—ah! that surprises you, does it? *Enfin!*—I do not see why you should be surprised!—*On va avec son siècle?*"

He retreated from me, and a frown of deepening indignation and scorn darkened his fine features.

"If this is a jest," he said sternly, "it is a poor one and in very bad taste! Perhaps you will condescend to explain——"

"Oh, certainly!" and I passed my hand in and out my rough uncombed hair—"*Voyons!* where shall I begin? Let me consider your questions. *Imprimis*,—what does this mean? Well, it means that the majority of men are beasts and the minority respectable;—needless to add that I belong to the majority. It is the strongest side, you know!—it always wins! Next,—why am I here? I really can't tell you—I forget what I did last night, and as a natural consequence, my wits have gone wool-gathering this morning. As for being still in Paris itself instead of running away to other less interesting parts of Europe, I really, on consideration, saw no reason why I should leave it—so in Paris I stayed. One can lose one's self in Paris quite as easily as in

a wilderness. I have kept out of your way, and I have not intruded my objectionable presence upon any one of our mutual friends. I did not write to you, because—well!—because I imagined it was better for you to try and forget me. To finish—you ask what has happened to me, —and what the reason is of this my present condition. I have taken to a new profession—that is all!"

"A new profession!" echoed my father blankly. "What profession?"

I looked at him steadfastly, dimly pitying him, yet feeling no inclination to spare him the final blow.

"Oh, a common one among men in Paris!" I responded with forced lightness —"Well known, well appreciated,—well paid too, albeit in strange coin. And perhaps the best part of it is, that once you adopt it you can never leave it,—it does not allow for any caprice or change of humour. You enter it,—and there you are!—an *idée fixe* in its brain!"

The old man drew himself up a little more stiffly erect and eyed me with an indignant yet sorrowful wonder.

"I do not understand you," he said curtly. "To me you seem foolish,—drunk,—disgraced! I cannot believe you are my son!"

"I am not!" I replied calmly. "Do not recognize me as such any longer! In the way I have chosen to live, one cuts all the ties of mere relationship. I should be of no use to you,—nor would you—pardon me for saying so!—be of any use to me! What should I do with a home or home associations?—I,—an *absintheur!*"

As the word left my lips, he seemed to stagger and sway forward a little,—I thought he would have fallen, and involuntarily I made a hasty movement to assist him;—but he waved me back with a feeble yet eloquent gesture,—his eyes flashed,—his whole form seemed to dilate with the passion of his wrath and pain.

"Back! Do not touch me!" he said in low fierce accents. "How dare you face

me with such an hideous avowal! An *absintheur?* You? What! You, my son, a confessed slave to that abominable vice that not only makes of its votaries cowards but madmen? My God! Would you had died as a child,—would I had laid you in the grave, a little innocent lad as I remember you, than have lived to see you come to this! An *absintheur!* In that one word is comprised all the worst possibilities of crime! Why—why in Heaven's name have you fallen so low?"

"Low?" I repeated. "You think it low? Well,—that is droll! Is it more low for example than a woman's infidelity? —a man's treachery? Have I not suffered, and shall I not be comforted? Some people solace themselves by doing their duty, and sacrifice their lives for a cause—for an idea;—and sorry recompense they win for it in the end! Now, I prefer to please myself in my own fashion—the fashion of *absinthe.* I am perfectly happy, —why trouble about me?"

His eyes met mine,—the brave honest eyes that had never known how to play at treachery,—and the look of unspeakable reproach in them went to my very heart. But I gave no outward sign of feeling.

"Is this all you have to say?" he asked at last.

"All!" I echoed carelessly. "Is it not enough?"

He waited as if to gather force for his next utterance,—and when he spoke again, his voice was sharp and resonant, almost metallic in its measured distinctnesss.

"Enough, certainly!" he said. "And more than enough! Enough to convince me without further argument, that I have no longer a son. My son,—the son I loved and knew as both child and man, is dead,—and I do not recognize the fiend that has arisen to confront me in his disfigured likeness! You—you were once Gaston Beauvais,—a gentleman in name and position,—you, who now avow yourself an *absintheur*, and take pride in the disgraceful

confession! My God!—I think I could have pardoned you anything but this,—any crime would have seemed light in comparison with this wilful debauchery of both intelligence and conscience, without which no man has manhood worthy of the name!"

I peered lazily at him from between my half-closed eyelids. He had really a very distinguished air!—he was altogether such a noble-looking old man!

"Good!" I murmured affably. "Very good! Very well said! Platitudes of course,—yet admirably expressed!"

His face flushed,—he grasped his stick convulsively.

"By Heaven!" he muttered, "I am tempted to strike you!"

"Do not!" I answered, smiling a little—"you would soil that handsome cane of yours, and possibly hurt your hand. I really am not worth the risk of these two contingencies!"

He gazed at me in blank amazement.

"Are you mad?" he cried.

"I don't think so," I responded quietly. "I don't feel so! On the contrary, I feel perfectly sane, tranquil, and comfortable! It seems to me that you are the madman in this case, *mon père*!—forgive me for the *brusquerie* of the observation!"

"I!" he echoed with a stupefied stare.

"Yes—you! You, who expect of men what is not in them,—you, who would have us all virtuous and respectable in order to win the world's good opinion. The world's good opinion! Pshaw! Who, knowing how the world forms its opinion, cares a jot, for that opinion when it is formed? Not I! I have created a world of my own, where I am sole law-giver,—and the code of morality I practise is *au fond* precisely the same as is followed under different auspices throughout society;—namely; *I please myself!*—which, after all, is the chief object of each man's existence."

Thus I rambled on half incoherently, indifferent as to whether my father stayed to listen to me or went away in disgust.

He had however now regained all his ordinary composure, and he held up his hand with an authoritative gesture.

"Silence!" he said. "You shame the very air you breathe! Listen to me,—understand well what I say,—and answer plainly if you can. You tell me you have become an *absintheur*,—do you know what that means?"

"I believe I do," I replied indifferently. "It means, in the end,—death."

"Oh, if it meant only death!" he exclaimed passionately. "If it meant only the common fate that in due time comes to us all! But it means more than this—it means crime of the most revolting character,—it means brutality, cruelty, apathy, sensuality, and mania! Have you realized the doom you create for yourself, or have you never thought thus far?"

I gave a gesture of weariness.

"*Mon père*, you excite yourself quite unnecessarily! I have thought, till I am tired of thinking,—I have conned over all

the problems of life till I am sick of the useless study! What is the good of it all? For example,—you are a banker,—I was your partner in business (you see I use the past tense though you have not formally dismissed me); now what a trouble and worry it is to consume one's days in looking after other people's money! To consider another profession,—the hackneyed one of fighting for 'La Patrie.' What does 'La Patrie' care for all the blood shed on her battle-fields? She is such a droll 'Patrie!' —one week, she shrieks out '*Alsace-Lorraine! En revanche!*'—the next, she talks calmly through her printing-presses of making friends with Germany, and even condescends to flatter the new German Emperor! In such a state of things, who would endure the toil and moil of military service, when one could sit idle all day in a *café*, drinking *absinthe* comfortably instead! Ah, bah! Do not look so indignant,—the days of romance are over, sir!—we want to do as we like with our lives,—not to be

coerced into wasting them on vain dreams of either virtue or glory!"

My father heard me in perfect silence. When I had finished speaking—

"That is your answer?" he demanded.

"Answer to what? Oh, as to whether I understand the meaning of being an *absintheur*. Yes!—that is my answer,—I am quite happy!—and even suppose I do become a maniac as you so amiably suggest, I have heard that maniacs are really very enviable sort of people. They imagine themselves to be kings, emperors, popes, and what not,—it is just as agreeable an existence as any other, I should imagine!"

"Enough!" and my father fixed his eyes upon me with such a coldness of unutterable scorn in them, as for the moment gave me a dim sense of shame,—"I want to hear no more special pleadings for the most degrading and loathsome vice of this our city and age. No more, I tell you!—not a word! What I have to say you will do well to remember, and think of as often

as your besotted brain can think! First, then, in the life you have elected to lead, you will cease to bear my name."

I bowed, smiling serenely.

"*Ça va sans dire!* I have already ceased to bear it," I answered him. "Your honour is safe with me, sir, I assure you, though I care nothing for my own!"

He went on as though he had not heard me.

"You will no longer have any connection with the Bank,—nor any share in its concerns. I shall take in your place as my partner your cousin Emil Versoix."

I bowed again. Emil Versoix was my father's sister's son,—a bright young fellow of about my own age;—what an opening for him, I thought!—and how proud he would be to get the position I had voluntarily resigned!

"I shall send you," continued my father "whatever sums are belonging to you on account of your past work and share with me in business. That, and no more. When

that is spent, live as you can, but do not come to me,—our relationship must be now a thing dissolved and broken for ever. From this day henceforth I disown you,—for I know that the hideous vice you pander to, allows for no future repentance or redemption. I *had* a son!"—and his voice quivered a little,—"a son of whom I was too fondly, foolishly proud,—but he is lost to me,—lost as utterly as the unhappy Pauline, or her no less unhappy lover, Silvion Guidèl."

I started, and a tremor ran through me.

"Lost!—Silvion Guidèl!" I stammered—"How?—lost, did you say?"

"Aye, lost!" repeated my father in melancholy accents—"If you have not heard, hear now,—for it is you who caused the mischief done to be simply irreparable! Your quondam friend, made priest, was sent to Rome,—and from Rome he has disappeared,—gone, no one knows where. All possible search has been made,—all

possible inquiry,—but in vain,—and his parents are mad with grief and desolation. Like the poor child Pauline, he has vanished, leaving no trace,—and though pity and forgiveness would await them both were they to return to their homes, as yet no sign has been obtained of either."

"They are probably together!" I said, with a sudden fierce laugh. "In some sequestered nook of the world, loving as lovers should, and mocking the grief of those they wronged!"

With an impetuous movement my father raised his cane,—and I certainly thought that this time he would have struck me,—but he restrained himself.

"Oh callous devil!" he cried wrathfully —"Is it possible——"

"Is what possible?" I demanded, my rage also rising in a tumult. "Nay, is it possible you can speak of 'pity and forgiveness' for those two guilty fools? Pity and forgiveness!—the prodigal son with the prodigal daughter welcomed back, and

the fatted calf killed to do them honour! Bah! What fine false sentiment! I—I"—and I struck my breast angrily—"I was and am the principal sufferer!—but see you!—because I win consolation in a way that harms no one but myself,—*I* am disinherited—*I* am disowned—*I* am cast out and spurned at,—while she, Pauline the wanton, and he, Guidèl, the seducer, are being searched for tenderly, high and low, to be brought back when found, to peace and pardon! Oh, the strange justice of the world! Enough of all this,—go!—go, you who were my father!—go! why should we exchange more words? You have chosen your path,—I mine! and you may depend upon it, the much admired and regretted Silvion Guidèl has chosen his! Go!—why do you stand there staring at me?"

For I had risen, and confronted him boldly,—he seemed nothing more to me now than a man grown foolish in his old age and unable to distinguish wrong from right. No one was near us,—we stood in a

sequestered corner of the Champs Elysées, and from the broader avenues came ringing between-whiles the laughter and chatter of children at play. He,—my father—looked at me with the strained startled gaze of a brave man wounded to the death.

"Can sorrow change you thus?" he said slowly. "Are you so much of a moral coward that you will allow a mere love-disappointment in youth, to blight and wither to nothingness your whole career? Are you not man enough to live it down?"

"I *am* living it down," I responded harshly. "But, in my own way! I am forgetting the world and its smug hypocrisies and canting mockery of virtue! I am ceasing to care whether women are faithful or men honourable,—I know they are neither, and I no longer expect it. I am killing my illusions one by one! When a noble thought, or a fine idea presents itself to me (which is but seldom!) I spring at its throat and strangle it, before it has

time to breathe! For I am aware that noble thoughts and fine ideas are the laughing-stock of this century, and that the stupid dreamers who indulge in them are made the dupes of the age! You look startled!—well you may!—to you, *mon père*, I am dangerous,—for—I loved you! And what I once loved is now become a mere reproach to me,—a blackness on my horizon—an obstruction in my path—so, keep out of my way, if you are wise! I promise to keep out of yours. The money you offer me I will not have,—I will beg, steal, starve,—anything, rather than take one *centime* from you, even though it be my right to claim the residue of what I earned. You shall see my face no more,—I will die and make no sign—to you I am dead already—let me be forgotten then as the dead always are forgotten,—in spite of the monuments raised to their memory!"

He gave a despairing gesture.

"Gaston!" he cried. "You kill me!"

I surveyed him tranquilly.

"Not so, *mon père*—I kill myself,—not you! You will live many years yet, in peace and safety and good repute among men,—and you will easily console yourself for the son you have lost in new ties and new surroundings. For you are not a coward,—I am! I am afraid of the very life that throbs within me,—it is too keen and devilish—it is like a sharp sword-blade that eats though its scabbard,—I do my best to blunt its edge! Blame me no more, —think of me no more,—I am not worth a single regret, and I do not seek to be regretted. I loved you once, *mon père*, as I told you,—but now, if I saw much of you, —of your independent air, your proud step, your sincere eyes—I dare say I should hate you!—for I hate all things honest! It is part of my new profession to do so"—and I laughed wildly—"Honesty is a mortal affront to an *absintheur!*—did you not know that? However, though the offence is great, I will not fight you for it—we will part friends! Adieu!"

I held out my hand. He looked at it,—did not touch it,—but deliberately put his cane behind his back, and folded his own two hands across it. His face was paler than before and his lips were set. His glance swept over me with unutterable reproach and scorn,—I smiled at his expression of dignified disgust,—and as I smiled, he turned away.

"*Adieu, mon père!*" I said again.

He gave no word or sign in answer, but with a slow, quiet, composed step paced onward,—his head erect,—his shoulders squared,—his whole manner as irreproachable as ever. No one could have thought he carried worse than a bullet-wound in his heart! *I* knew it—but I did not care. I watched his tall figure disappear through the arching foliage of the trees without regret,—without remorse—indeed with rather a sense of relief than otherwise. He was the best friend I ever had or should have in the world—this I realized plainly enough,—but the very remembrance of his virtues

bored me! It was tiresome to think of him,—and it was better to lose him, for the infinitely more precious sake of—*Absinthe.*

III.

I PASSED the rest of that day in a strange sort of semi-somnolence,—a state of stupid dull indifferentism as to what next should happen to me. I cannot say that I even thought,—for the powers of thinking in me were curiously inert, almost paralyzed. The interview I had had with my father faded away into a sort of pale and blurred remembrance,—it seemed to have taken place years ago instead of hours. That is one of the special charms of the *Absinthe-furia;* it makes a confused chaos of all impressions, so that it is frequently impossible to distinguish between one event occurring long ago and one that has happened quite recently. True, there are times when certain faces and certain scenes

dart out vividly from this semi-obscure neutrality of colour, and take such startling shape and movement as to almost distract the brain they haunt and intimidate,—but these alarms to the seat of reason are not frequent,—at least, not at first. Afterwards —— But why should I offer you too close an explanation of these subtle problems of mind-attack and overwhelment? I tell you my own experience;—you can, and I dare say you will pooh-pooh it as an impossible one,—the mere distraught fancy of an excited imagination,—but,—if you would find out and prove how truly I am dissecting my own heart and soul for your benefit, why take to *Absinthe* yourself and see!—and describe the result thereafter more coherently than I—if you can!

All day long, as I have said, I roamed about Paris in a dream,—a dream wherein hazy reflections, dubious wonderments, vague speculations, hovered to and fro without my clearly perceiving their drift or meaning. I laughed a little as I tried to

imagine what my father would have said, had he known what had truly become of Silvion Guidèl! If he could have guessed that I had murdered him! What would he have done, I wondered? Probably he would have given me up to the police;—he had a frightfully strained idea of honour, and he would never have been brought to see the justice of my crime as I did! It amused me to think of those stupid Breton folk searching everywhere for their "*bien-aimé Silvion;*" and making every sort of inquiry about him, when all the while he was lying in the common *fosse*, festering away to nothingness! Yes!—he was nothing now,—he was dead—quite dead,—and yet, I could not disabuse myself of the impression that he was still alive! My nerves were in that sort of condition that at any moment I expected to see him,—it seemed quite likely that he might meet me at any corner of any street. This circumstance and others similiar to it, make me at times doubtful as to whether Death is

really the conclusion of things the positivists tell us it is. True, the body dies—but there is something in us more than body. And how is it that when we look at the corpse of one whom we knew and loved, we always feel that the actual being who held our affections is no longer *there?* If not there, then—*where?* Silvion Guidèl for instance was everywhere,—or so I felt,—instead of being got rid of as I had hoped, he seemed to follow me about in a strange and very persistent way,—so that when he was not actually visible in spectral shape, he was almost palpable in invisibility. This impression was so pronounced with me, that it is possible, had I been taken unawares and asked some sudden question as to Guidèl's whereabouts, I should have answered; "He was with me here, just a minute ago!"

And yet—I had killed him! I knew this,—knew it positively,—and knowing, still vaguely refused to believe it! Everything was misty and indefinite with me,—

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and the interview I had just had with my father soon became a part of the shadowy chiaroscuro of events uncertain and nameless, of which I had no absolutely distinct memory.

I stared into many shops that afternoon, and went into some of them, asking the prices of things I had no intention of buying. I took a sort of fantastic pleasure in turning over various costly trifles of feminine adornment, such as bracelets, necklets, dangling *châtelaines*, and useless fripperies of all possible design,—things that catch the eye and charm the soul of almost every simpering daughter of Eve that clicks her high Louis Quinze heels along the asphalte of our Lutetian pavements and avenues. Why was it, I mused, that Pauline de Charmilles had not been quite like the rest of her sex in such matters? I had given her costly gifts in abundance,—but she had preferred the fire of Silvion's passionate glance,—and his kiss had outweighed in her mind any trinket of flawless pearl or

glistening diamond! Strange!—Yet she was the child who had laughed up in my eyes the first night I met her, and had talked in foolish school-girl fashion of her favorite "*marrons glacés*"! Heavens!—what odd material women are made of! Then, one would have thought a box of bon-bons sufficient to give her supremest delight,—a string of gems would surely have sent her into an ecstasy!—and yet this dimpling, babyish, frivolous, prattling feminine thing had dared the fatal plunge into the ocean of passion,—and there,—sinking, struggling, dying, lost,—with fevered pulses and parched lips, still clung to the frail spar of her own self-centred hope and drifted,—content to perish so, thirsting, starving, under the cruel stars of human destiny that make too much love a curse to lovers,—yes!—actually content to perish so,—proud, thankful, even boastful to perish so, because such death was for Love's sweet-bitter sake! It was remarkable to find such a phase of character in a

creature as young as Pauline; or so I thought,—and I wondered dimly whether I had loved her as much as she had loved Guidèl. No sooner did I begin to meditate on this subject than I felt that cold and creeping thrill of brain-horror which I know now,—(for it comes often and I fight as well as I can against it) to be the hint,—the far fore-warning of madness,—wild, shrieking, untameable madness such as makes the strongest keepers of maniac-men recoil and cower! I tell you, doubt it as you will, that my love for Pauline de Charmilles—the silly child who tortured and betrayed me,—was immeasurably greater than I myself had deemed it,—and I dare not even now dwell too long on its remembrance! I loved her as men love who are not ashamed of loving,—every soft curl of hair on her head was precious to me,—once!—and as I thought upon it, it drove me into a paroxysm of impotent ferocity to recall what I had lost,—how I had been tricked and fooled and mocked and robbed of all

life's dearest joys! At one time, as I wandered aimlessly about the streets, I had a vague idea of setting myself steadily to track out the lost girl by some practical detective method,—of finding her, probably in a state of dire poverty and need,—and of forcing her still to be mine,—but this like all other plans or suggestions of plans, lacked clearness or certainty in my brain, and I merely played with it in my fancy as a thing that possibly might, and still more possibly might not, be done ere long.

I ate very little food all that day, and when the evening came I was conscious of a heavy depression and sense of great loneliness. This feeling was of course getting more and more common with me,—it is the deadly stupor of the *absintheur* which frequently precedes some startling phase of nightmare fantasy. I had a craving, similar to that of the previous night for the rush of crowds, for light and noise,—so I made my way to the Boulevard Montmartre. Here throngs of people swept forward and backward like

the ebb and flow of an ocean-tide,—it was fine weather, and the little tables in front of the *cafés* were pushed far out, some almost to the edge of the curbstone,—while the perpetual shriek and chatter of the Boulevard monkeys, male and female, surged through the quiet air with incessant reverberations of shrill discord. Here and there one chanced on the provincial British *pater-familias* new to Paris, with his coffee in front of him, his meek fat-faced partner beside him, and his olive-branches spreading around,—and it is always to a certain extent amusing to watch the various expressions of wonder, offence, severity, and general superiority which pass over the good stupid features of such men when they first find themselves in a crowd of Parisian idlers,—men who are so agressively respectable in their own estimation that they imagine all the rest of the world, especially the Continental world, must be scoundrels. Once, however, by chance I saw a British "papa," the happy father of ten, coming out of a

place of amusement in Paris where *certes* he had no business to be,—but I afterwards heard that he was a very good man, and always went regularly to church o' Sundays *when he was at home!* I suppose he made it all right with his conscience in that way. It is a droll circumstance, by the bye,—that steady going-to-church of the English folk in order to keep up appearances in their respective neighbourhoods. They know they can learn nothing there,—they know that their vicars or curates will only tell them the old platitudes of religion such as all the world has grown weary of hearing—they know that nothing new, nothing large, nothing grand can be expected from these narrow-minded expounders of a doctrine which is not of God nor of Christ, nor of anything save convenience and self-interest, and yet they attend their dull services and sermons regularly and soberly without any more unbecoming behaviour than an occasional yawn or brief nap in the corner of their pews. Droll and inexplicable are the

ways of England!—and yet withal, they are better than the ways of France when everything is said and done. I used to hate England in common with all Frenchmen worthy the name,—but now I am not so sure. I saw an English woman the other day,—young and fair, with serious sweet eyes,—she walked in the Champs Elyseés by the side of an elderly man, her father doubtless,—and she seemed gravely, not frivolously, pleased with what she saw. But she had that exquisite composure, that serene quietude and grace,—that fine untouchable delicacy about her air and manner which our women of France have little or nothing of,—an air which made *me*, the *absintheur*, slink back as she passed,—slink and crouch in hiding till she, the breathing incarnation of sweet and stainless womanhood, had taken her beauty out of sight,—beauty which was to me a stinging silent reproach, reminding me of the dignity of life,—a dignity which I had trampled in the dust and lost for ever!

Yes!—it was merry enough on the bright Boulevards that evening,—there were many people,—numbers of strangers and visitors to Paris among them. I strolled leisurely to the *café* I knew best, where my absinthe-witch brewed her emerald potion with more than common strength and flavour,—and I had not sat there so very long, meditatively stirring round and round the pale-green liquor in my glass when I saw André Gessonex approaching. I remembered then that I had told him to meet me some evening at this very place on the Boulevard Montmartre, though I had scarcely expected to see him quite so soon. He looked tidier than usual,—he had evidently made an attempt to appear more gentlemanly than ever,—even his disordered hair had been somewhat arranged with a view to neatness. He saw me at once, and came jauntily up,—lifting his hat with the usual flourish. He glanced at my tumbler.

"The old cordial!" he said with a laugh. "What a blessëd remedy for all the ills

of life it is, to be sure! Almost as excellent as death,—only not quite so certain in its effects. Have you been here long?"

"Not long," I responded, setting a chair for him beside my own. "Shall I order your portion of the nectar?"

"Ah!—do so!"—and he stroked his pointed beard absently, while he stared at me with an unseeing, vague yet smiling regard—"I am going to purchase a '*Journal pour Rire*';—it has a cartoon that—but perhaps you have seen it?"

I had seen it—a pictured political skit,—but its obscenity had disgusted even me. I say 'even' me,—because now I was not easily shocked or repelled. But this particular thing was so gratuitously indecent that, though I was accustomed to see Parisians enjoy both pictorial and literary garbage with the zest of vultures tearing carrion, I was somewhat surprised at their tolerating so marked an instance of absolute grossness without wit. It astonished me too to hear Gessonex speak of it,—I should not

have thought it in his line. However I assented briefly to his query.

"It is clever"—he went on, still thoughtfully stroking his beard—"and it is a reflex of the age we live in. Its sale to-day will bring in much more money than I ask for one of my pictures. And that is another reflex of the age! I admire the cartoon,—and I envy the artist who designed it!"

I burst out laughing.

"*You!* You envy the foul-minded wretch who polluted his pencil with such a thing as that?"

"Assuredly!" and Gessonex smiled,—a peculiar far-away sort of smile. "He dines, and I do not—he sleeps, and I do not,—he has a full purse,—mine is empty!—and strangest anomaly of all, because he pays his way he is considered respectable,—while I, not being able to pay my way, am judged as quite the reverse! Foul-minded? Polluted? Tut, *mon cher!* there is no foul-mindedness nowadays except lack of cash,—and the only pollution possible to

the modern artist's pencil is to use it on work that does not pay!"

With these words he turned from me and went towards the little *kiosque* at the corner close by, where the journals of the day were sold by the usual sort of painted and betrinketed female whom one generally sees presiding over these street-stalls of the cheap press,—and I watched him curiously, not knowing why I did so. He was always affected in his walk,—but on this particular evening his swaggering gait seemed to be intensified. I saw him take the "*Journal pour Rire*" in his hand,—and I heard him give a loud harsh guffaw of laughter at the wretched cartoon it contained,—laughter in which the woman, who sold it to him, joined heartily with that ready appreciation which nearly all low-class Frenchwomen exhibit for the questionable and indelicate,—and I turned away my eyes from him, vaguely vexed at his manner,—I had always deemed him above mere brute coarseness. It was to me a new phase of his character, and ill

became him,—moreover it seemed put on, like a mask or other disfiguring disguise. I looked away from him, as I say,—when, all at once,—the sharp report of a pistol-shot, hissed through the air,—there was a flash of flame — a puff of smoke, — then came a fearful scream from the woman at the kiosque, followed by a sudden rush of people,—and I sprang up just in time to see Gessonex reel forward and fall heavily to the ground! In less than a minute a crowd had gathered round him, but I forced my way through the pressing throng till I reached his side, — and then,—then I very quickly realized what had happened! *Absinthe* had done its work well this time!—and no divine intervention had stopped the suicide of the body any more than it had stopped the suicide of the soul! The powers of heaven are always very indifferent about these matters,—and Gessonex had taken all laws both human and superhuman into his own hands for the nonce,—he had shot himself!

He had coolly and deliberately sent a bullet whizzing through his brain,—his fingers still convulsively grasped the weapon with which he had done the deed—his mouth was streaming with blood, — and the "Journal pour Rire," with its detestable cartoon, lay near him, spotted and stained with the same deadly crimson hue. A ghastly sight !—a horrible end !—and yet—there was something indescribably beautiful in the expression of the wide-open, fast-glazing eyes ! Mastering my sick fear and trembling I bent over him,—a young surgeon who had happened to be passing by at the time, was bending over him too and gently wiping away the blood from his lips,—and to this man I addressed a hurried word.

"Is he dead ?"

"No. He still breathes. But, a couple of minutes,—*et c'est fini !*"

Gessonex heard, and made a slight movement to and fro with one hand on his breast

"Oui, c'est fini !" he muttered thickly.

"Le dernier mot du Christ!—le dernier mot de tout le monde!—c'est fini! Enfin —j'ai payé . . . tout!"

And stretching out his limbs with a long and terrible shudder he expired. The features whitened slowly and grew rigid—the jaw fell,—all was over! I rose from my kneeling attitude on the pavement like one in a dream,—scarcely noting the awed and pitying faces of the crowd of by-standers,—and found myself face to face with a couple of gendarmes. They were civil enough, but they had their duty to perform.

"You knew him?" they asked me, pointing to the corpse.

"Only slightly,"—I responded,—"a mere acquaintance."

"Ah! But you can give us his name?"

"Assuredly! André Gessonex."

"What? The artist?" exclaimed some one near me.

"Yes. The artist."

"*Mon Dieu!* What a calamity! André

Gessonex! A genius!—and we have so few geniuses! Messieurs, c'est André Gessonex qui est mort! grand peintre, voyez-vous!—grand homme de France!"

I listened, stupefied. It was like one of the scenes of a wild nightmare! "Grand homme de France!" What!—so soon great, now that he was dead? Utterly bewildered I heard the name run from mouth to mouth,—people who had never known it before, caught it up like a watch-word, and in a moment the fever of French enthusiasm had spread all along the Boulevards. The man who had first started it, talked louder and louder, growing more and more eloquent with every bombastic shower of words he flung to his eager and attentive audience,—the excitement increased,—the virtues of the dead man were proclaimed and exalted, and his worth found out suddenly, and as suddenly acknowledged with the wildest public acclaim! A stretcher was brought,—the body of Gessonex was laid upon it and covered reverently with

a cloth,—I was asked for, and gave the address of the miserable room where the poor forlorn wretch had struggled for bare existence,—and in a very few minutes a procession was formed, which added to its numbers with every step of the way. Women wept,—men chattered volubly in true Parisian fashion concerning the great gifts of one whom they had scarcely ever heard of till now,—and I watched it all, listened to it all in a vague incredulous stupor which utterly darkened all my capability of reasoning out the mingled comedy and tragedy of the situation. But when the silly, hypocritical mourning-train had wound itself out of sight, I went away in my turn,—away from everything and everybody into a dusky, cool, old and unfrequented church, and there in full view of the sculptured Christ on the cross, I gave way to reckless laughter! Yes!—laughter that bordered on weeping, on frenzy, on madness, if you will!—for who would not laugh at the woeful yet ridiculous comedy

of the world's ways and the world's justice! André Gessonex, alive, might starve for all Paris cared,—but André Gessonex dead, hurried out of existence by his own act, was in a trice of time discovered to be "*grand homme de France!*" Ah, ye cruel beasts that call yourselves men and women! —cruel and wanton defacers of God's impress on the human mind, if any impress of God there be,—is there no punishment lurking behind the veil of the Universe for you that shall in some degree atone to all the great who have suffered at your hands? To be nobler than common is a sufficient reason for contempt and misprisal by the vulgar majority, — and never yet was there a grand spirit shut in human form, whether Socrates or Christ, that has not been laid on the rack of torture and wrenched piecemeal by the red-hot flaying-irons of public spite, derision, or neglect. Surely there shall be an atonement? If not, then there is a figure set wrong in the mathematical balance of Creation,—a line

awry,—a flaw in the round jewel,—and God Himself cannot be Perfect! But why do I talk of God? I do not believe in Him,—and yet,—one is always perplexed and baffled by the Inexplicable Cause of things. And, — somehow, — my laughter died away in a sob, as I sat in the quiet gloom of the lonely old church and watched the dim lamps twinkle above the altar; while all that was mortal of André Gessonex was being carried mournfully back to his miserable attic by the capricious, weeping, laughing, frivolous crowds of Paris that had let him die, self-slain!

IV.

A FEW days elapsed, and the rest of the little miserable farce of Fame was played out with all the pomp and circumstance of a great tragedy. The wretched hole which had served poor Gessonex for both studio and sleeping-room was piled so high with wreaths of roses and laurel that one could scarcely enter its low door for the abundance of flowers,—all his debts were paid by voluntary contributions from suddenly discovered admirers, and the merest unfinished sketch he had left behind him fetched fabulous sums. The great picture of the priest in the cathedral was found uncurtained, with a paper pinned across it bearing these words—

"Bequeathed to France
In exchange for a Grave!"

And the fame of it went through all the land,—everybody spoke of "Le Prêtre"—as it was called,—all the newspapers were full of it,—it was borne reverently to the Musée du Luxembourg, and there hung in a grand room by itself, framed with befitting splendour and festooned about with folds of royal purple ;—and people came softly in to look at it and to wonder at the terror and pathos of its story,—and whispering pity for the painter's fate was on the lips of all the fair and fashionable dames of Paris, who visited it in crowds and sent garlands of rare value to deck its dead creator's coffin. And I,—I looked on, sarcastically amused at everything,—and all I did, was to visit the blossom-scented garret from time to time to see the "*brute*,"—the strange, uncouth little boy, whom Gessonex had designated as his "model for the Stone Period,"—and "a production of Absinthe." This elvish creature would not believe his patron was dead,—he could not be brought to understand it in any sort of way,—neither

could he be persuaded to touch a morsel of food. Night after night, day after day, he kept watch by the mortal remains of his only friend, like a faithful hound,—his whole soul concentrated as it seemed in his large bright eyes, which rested on the set waxen features of the dead man with a tenderness and patience that was almost awful. At last the final hour came,—the time for the funeral, which was to be a public one, carried out with all the honours due to departed greatness,—and it was then that the poor "*brute*" began to be troublesome. He clung to the coffin with more than human strength and tenacity,—and when they tried to drag him away, he snarled and bit like a wild cat. No one knew what to do with him,—and finally a suggestion was made that he should be gagged, tied with cords, and dragged away by force from the chamber of death, in which the poor child had learned all he knew of life. This course was decided upon, and early in the afternoon of the day on which

it was to be carried out, I went into the room and looked at him, conscious of a certain vague pity stirring at my heart for his wretched fate. The sunlight streamed in, making a wide pattern on the floor,—wreaths and cushions of *immortelles*, and garlands of laurel were piled about everywhere,—and in the centre of these heaped-up floral offerings, the coffin stood,—the lid partly off, for the little savage guardian of it would never allow it to be actually shut. The face of Gessonex was just visible,—it had changed from meagreness to beauty,—a great peace was settled and engraved upon it,—and fragrant lilies lay all about his throat and brow, hiding the wound in his temple and covering up all disfigurement. The boy sat beside the coffin immovable,—watchfully intent as usual,—apparently waiting for his friend to awake. On an impulse I spoke to him,—

"Tu as faim, mon enfant?"

He looked up.

"Non!" The reply was faint and sullen,

—and he kept his head turned away as he spoke.

I waited a moment, and then went up and laid my hand gently on his shoulder.

"Listen!" I said slowly, separating my words with careful distinctness, for I knew his comprehension of language was limited, —"You wait for what will not happen. He is not asleep—so he cannot wake. Try to understand me,—he is not here."

The great jewel-like eyes of the child rested on me earnestly.

"Not here?" he repeated dully. "Not here?"

"No," I said firmly. "He has gone! Where? Ah,—that is difficult!—but—we believe, not so very far away. See!"—and I moved the flowers a little that covered the breast of the corpse,—"This man is pale—he is made of marble,—he does not move, he does not speak—he does not look at you,—how then can it be your friend? Surely you can observe for yourself that he cares nothing for you,—if it were your

friend he would smile and speak to you. He is not here,—this white, quiet personage is not he !—he is gone ! "

Some glimmer of my meaning seemed to enter the boy's brain, for he suddenly stood up, and an anxious look clouded his face.

" Gone ? " he echoed. " Gone ?—but why should he go ? "

" He was tired ! " I replied, smiling a little. " He needed peace and rest. You will find him, I am sure, if you look, among the green trees where the bird's sing—where there are running brooks and flowers, and fresh winds to shake the boughs,—where all artists love to dwell when they can escape from cities. He has gone, I tell you !—and Paris is making one of its huge mistakes as usual. This is not Gessonex,—why do you not go after him and find him ? "

An eager light sparkled in his eyes,—he clenched his hands and set his teeth.

" Oui, — oui ! " he murmured rapidly. " Je vais le chercher—mon Dieu !—mais . . . où donc ? "

Now was my opportunity, if he would only suffer himself to be persuaded away!

"Come with me," I said. "I will take you to him."

He fixed his gaze upon me,—the half-timorous, half-trusting gaze of a wild animal,—a look that somehow shamed me by its strange steadfastness, so that it was as much as I could do to meet it without embarrassment. He was a little savage at heart,—and he had the savage's instinctive perception of treachery.

"Non!" he muttered resolutely—"Je vais le chercher, seul! . . . Il n'est pas ici?"

And with this query addressed more to himself than to me, he sprang again to the side of the coffin and looked in;—and then for the first time as it seemed, the consciousness of the different aspect of his friend, appeared to strike him.

"C'est vrai!" he said amazedly. "Il n'est pas ici! ce n'est pas lui! J'ai perdu le temps;—je vais le chercher!—mais, seul! —seul!"

And without another moment's delay he crept past me like the strange, stealthy creature he was, and running swiftly down the stairs, disappeared. I sat still in the room for some time expecting he would return, but he did not,—he was gone, heaven only could tell where. A little later in the day the men came who were prepared to take him captive,—and glad enough they were to find him no longer in their way, for no one had much relished the idea of a tussle with the wild, devilish-looking little creature whose natural ferocity was so declared and so untameable; and all the arrangements for the last obsequies of André Gessonex were now completed without any further delay or interruption. As for me, I knew I had sent the child into a wilderness of perplexities that would never be cleared up,—he would search and search for his patron probably till he died of sheer fatigue and disappointment,—but what then? As well die that way as any other,—I could not befriend him,—besides,

even had I wished to do so, the chances were that he would not have trusted me. Anyway I saw him no more,—whatever his fate I never knew it.

And so it came about that the funeral of the starved, unhappy, half mad painter of "Le Prêtre" was the finest thing that had been seen in Paris for many a long day! Such pomp and solemnity,—such prancing of black steeds—such glare of blessëd candles—such odorous cars of flowers! Once upon a time a suicide was not entitled to any religious rites of burial,—but we, with our glorious Republic which keeps such a strong coercing hand on the priests, and will hear as little of God as may be,—we have changed all that! We do as seemeth good unto ourselves,—and we do not despise a man for having sent himself out of the world,—on the contrary we rather admire his spirit. It is a sort of defiance of the Divine,—and as such, meets with our ready sympathy! And I smiled as I saw the mortal remains of my absinthe-

drinking friend carried to the last long rest; —I thought of his own fantastic dreams as to what his final end should be. "The Raphael of France!"—so he had imagined he would be called, when he had, in his incoherent, yet picturesque style, described to me his own fancied funeral. Well!—so far he had been a fairly accurate seer;—and in leaping the boundary-line of life he had caught Fame like a shooting-star and turned it into a torch to shed strange brilliancy on his grave. All was well with him,—he had not missed glory in death though he had lacked food in life! All was well with him!—he had received the best possible transformation of his being,—his genuis was everything, and *he* was nothing! I watched his solemn obsequies to their end, —I heard one of the most famous orators of France proclaim his praise over the yawning tomb in which they laid him down,—and when all was done, I, with every one else, departed from the scene. But some hours later,—after the earth had

been piled above him,—I returned to Père-la-Chaise and sat by the just-covered grave alone. I remembered he had said he liked white violets,—and I had yielded to a foolish sentiment and had bought a small garland of them. I laid them on the cold and fresh-turned soil,—their scent sweetened the air—and I rested quietly for a few moments, thinking. My mind had been clearer since the last one or two days,—my faculties, instead of being dulled, were more than usually acute,—painfully so at times,—for every nerve in my body would throb and quiver at the mere passage of an idea through my brain. I looked up at the sky,—it was a dappled grey colour, flecked here and there with gold,—for the setting of the sun was nigh,—then I looked again at the white violets that lay, fragrant and pure, on the top of all the other wreaths of laurel and myrtle that covered Gessonex's grave. There was to be a fair monument raised above it, so the people said,—but I doubted it! Doré's last resting-place

remains unmarked to this day! My countrymen promise much more than they perform,—it is charming "politesse" on their part, so we do not call it lying!

Presently my eyes began to wander round and about the cemetery, which is beautiful in its way,—a veritable City of the Dead, where no rough rumours stir the air,—and by-and-bye I caught sight of the name "De Charmilles" carved on the marble portal of a tomb not very far distant. I realized that I was close to the funeral-vault of the once proud family Pauline (not I!) had disgraced and ruined, —and acting on a sudden instinct which I could not explain to myself, I rose and went towards it. It was built in the shape of a small chapel, as many of these tombs are,—it had stained glass windows and armorial bearings, and a pair of sculptured angels guarded it with uplifted crosses and drooping wings. But there was a figure in front of it kneeling at the closed door that was no angel,—but merely a woman. She

was slight, and clad in poorest garments,—the evening wind blew her thin shawl about her like a gossamer sail,—but the glimmer of the late sunlight glistened on a tress of nut-brown hair that had escaped from its coils and fell loosely over her shoulders,—and my heart beat thickly as I looked,—I knew—I felt that woman was Pauline! Now, should I speak to her, or should I wait,—wait till those open-air devotions of hers were done, and then follow her stealthily and track her out to whatever home she had found in the wilderness of the city? I pondered a moment and decided on the latter course,—then, crouching behind one of the gravestones hard by, I watched her and kept still. How long she knelt there!—and what patience women have! They never seem to tire of asking favours of the God who never hears,—or if He does hear, never answers! It must be dull work,—and yet they do it! The sun went down—the breeze blew more coldly,—and at last, with a long sigh that was half

a moan, a sound that came shuddering forlornly to me where I was in hiding, she rose, and with slow, rather faltering tread went on her way out of the cemetery. I followed, walking on the grass that my footsteps might not be heard. Once she turned round,—I saw her face, and seeing it, recoiled. For it was still so wondrously fair and child-like, though ravaged by grief and made pallid by want and anxiety,—it was still the face that had captivated my soul and made me mad!—though I had now discarded that form of madness for another more lasting! Out into the public thoroughfare we passed, she and I, one following the other,—and for more than half an hour I kept her in sight, closely tracking the movement of her slender figure as it glided through the throng of street-passengers, — then,—all suddenly I lost her! With a muttered curse, I stood still, searching about me eagerly on all sides,—but vainly,—she was gone! Was she a phantom too, like Silvion Guidèl?

What a fool I had been not to at once attack her with a rough speech while she was kneeling at her father's grave! It was no sentiment of pity that had held me back from so doing,—why had I let her go? Heartily enraged at my own stupidity, I sauntered discontentedly homeward. I had changed residence of late,—for my money was not inexhaustible,—and as I had refused the additional funds I might have had by right at my father's hands, it was well I had already decided to exercise economy. I had taken a couple of small rooms, decent and tidy enough in their way, in a clean and fairly respectable house,—that is, respectable for the poorer quarters of Paris,—it is only recently that I have come to the den where I live now. But that is the humour of Absinthe!—it leads one down in the social scale so gently, step by step,—so insidiously,—so carefully —that one cannot see the end. And even for me, the end is not yet!

V.

In the thickest part of the woods of Boulogne it is easy to fancy one's self miles away from Paris,—the landscape is gently pleasing and pastoral, and to the eyes that are unsatiated with grander scenery, it will assuredly seem beautiful. I found myself there one morning about an hour before noon,—I had taken a sudden fancy to see the green trees, to inhale the odour of the pines, and to watch the light breath of the wind sweep over the grass, ruffling it softly, just as water is ruffled, into varying ripples of delicate greys and greens. I avoided those avenues where the pretty young girls of Paris may be seen with their *gouvernantes*, walking demurely along with downcast eyes and that affectation of perfect innocence

which does so charm and subdue the spirits of men until,—well!—until they find it is all put on for show, to ensnare them into the marriage-market! I strolled into bosky dells, rendered sweeter by the luxury of solitude,—I, though I had the stain of murder on my soul, for once felt almost at peace! I wandered about dreamily and listlessly,—the *absintheur* has his occasional phases of tranquillity like other people,—tranquillity that is as strange and as overpowering as a sudden swoon,—in which the tired senses rest, and the brain is for the nonce empty of all images and impressions. And so I was scarcely startled when, pushing aside the boughs that screened a mossy turn in the pathway, I came upon what at first seemed like the picture of a woman reading,—till at last it resolved itself into substantial fact and form, and I recognized Héloïse St. Cyr. She sat alone on a little rustic bench,—her face and figure were slightly turned away from me,—she was dressed in black, but she had taken off her

hat and placed it beside her, and the sunlight flickering through the boughs above her, played fully on her glorious gold hair. Her head was bent attentively over the book she held,—her attitude was full of graceful ease and unstudied repose,—and as I watched her from a little distance, a sense of sudden awe and fear stole over me,—I trembled in every limb. A good girl, mark you!—a brave, sweet, pure-minded woman, is the most terrific reproach that exists on earth to the evil-doer and wicked man. It is as though the deaf blind God suddenly made Himself manifest,—as though He not only heard and saw, but with His voice thundered loud accusation! Many of us,—I speak of men,—cling to bad women, and give them our ungrudging admiration—and why? Because they help us to be vile!—because they laugh at our vices and foster them,—and we love them for that! But *good* women!—I tell you that such are often left loveless and alone, because they will not

degrade themselves to our brute-level. We want toys, — not angels!—puppets, not queens! But all the same, when the angel or the queen passes us by with the serene scorn of our base passions written in her clear calm eyes, we shrink and are ashamed, —aye! if only for a moment's space!

And she,—Héloïse,—sat there before me, unconscious of my presence—unconscious that the pure air about her was tainted by the unquiet breathing of a murderer and coward! For I knew myself to be both these things,—Absinthe had given me the spirit of braggardism, but had deprived me of all true courage. Boastfulness is not valour,—yet it often passes for such in France. Poor France,—fair France,—dear France!—there are some of her sons still left who would give their life blood to see her rise up in her old glory, and be again what she once was—a queen of nations. But alas!—it is not because of the German conquest,—nor because she has had foolish rulers, that she has fallen and is still falling,

—it is because the new morals and opinions of the age, propounded and accepted by narrow-minded, superficial, and materialistic thinkers, breed in her a nest of vipers and scorpions instead of men ; and your ordinary modern Frenchman has too low an estimate of all high ideals to risk his life in fighting for any one of them. There are exceptions to the rule certainly,—there are always exceptions ;—but they are rare ;—so rare, that we have let all Europe know there is no really strong, wise ruling brain in France, any more than there is in England. One would no more accept M. Carnot as a representative of the French national intellect, than one would accept Mr. Gladstone and his contradictions as a representative of English stability.

The wind rustled the boughs,—a bird sang softly among the upper cool bunches of leaves,—and I stood, screened by the foliage, nervously hesitating, and looking at Héloïse, the sweetest and best woman I had ever known. Always fond of reading she

was!—and my restless mind flew off to a hazy consideration of what her book might possibly be. One might safely conclude it was not by Zola,—the literary scavenger of Paris would have no charm for that high-souled, proudly-delicate Normandy-bred maiden. Probably it was one of her favourite classics,—or a volume of poems,—she was a great lover of poesy. I heard her sigh,—a deep fluttering sigh that mingled itself with the low-whispering wind,—she suddenly closed her book,—and raising her eyes, looked out on the quiet landscape,—away from me. My heart beat fast,—but I resolved to speak to her,—and with a hasty movement I thrust aside the intervening boughs.

"Héloïse!"

She started, — what a pale, amazed, scared face she turned upon me! Did she not know me?

"Héloïse!" I said again.

She rose nervously from her seat, and glanced about her from right to left, ap-

parently searching for some way of escape, —it was evident she took me for some drunken or impertinent stranger. I had forgotten how changed I was,—I had forgotten that I looked more like a tramp than a gentleman! I laughed a little confusedly, and lifted my hat.

"You do not seem to recognize me, Héloïse!" I said carelessly. "Yet Gaston Beauvais was once no stranger to you!"

Oh, what a wondering, piteous look she gave me!—what a speechless sorrow swam suddenly into the large, lovely grey eyes!

"Gaston Beauvais!" she faltered—"oh no;—not possible! You,—you—Gaston? Oh no!—no!"

And, covering her face with her two fair white hands, she broke into sudden weeping! . . . My God!—it would have been well if I could have killed myself then! For my heart was touched;—my hard, hard heart that I thought had turned to stone! Her tears, the sincere outflow of a pure woman's womanly grief, fell like dew on

my burnt and callous soul, and for a moment I was stricken dumb with an aching remorse, —remorse that I should have voluntarily placed such a chasm of eternal separation between all good things and the accursëd Me that now seemed to usurp Creation rather than belong to it. I felt a choking sensation in my throat,—my lips grew parched ;—I strove to speak once or twice but failed,—and she,—she, poor child, wept on. Presently, making an effort to conquer myself, I ventured to approach her a step or two more nearly.

"Héloïse! Mademoiselle St. Cyr!"—I said unsteadily—"Pray—pray do not distress yourself like this! I was foolish to have spoken to you—you were not prepared to see me ;—I have startled,—alarmed you! —I am much altered in my looks, I know,— but I forgot,—pray forgive me!"

She checked her sobs,—and uncovering her tear-wet eyes, turned their humid lustre full upon me. I shrank a little backward, —but she stretched out her trembling hands.

"It is really you, M. Gaston?" she murmured nervously. "Oh, have you been very ill? You look so strange and pale!—you have greatly changed!"

"Yes, for the worse!—I know that!" I interrupted her quietly. "You could scarcely expect me to improve, could you, Héloïse? Nay, did you not yourself curse me, not so very long ago?—and are you surprised to find the curse fulfilled?"

She sank on the rustic bench she had just quitted, and regarded me with an affrighted look.

"I cursed you?" she echoed—"I?—oh yes, yes! I remember—I was wicked—on that dreadful day of Pauline's disgrace and ruin, I said hard things to you—I know!—I was full of pain and anger,—but, believe me, that very night I prayed for you!—indeed I have prayed for you always—for you and my lost Pauline!"

The tenderness her presence had aroused in me, froze suddenly into chill cynicism.

"*Pardieu!* Women are curious crea-

tures!" I said, with a bitter laugh. "They curse a man at noon-day,—and pray for him at midnight! That is droll! But beware how you couple perjured lovers' names together, even in prayer, mademoiselle —your God, if He be consistent can scarcely care to attend to such a petition,—as an instance, you see how He has taken care of *me!*"

Her head drooped;—a shudder ran through her frame, but she was silent.

"Look at me!" I went on recklessly. "Look! Why, you would not have known me if I had not declared myself! You remember Gaston Beauvais?—what a dandy he was,—how spruce and smart and even fastidious in dress?—a silly young fool for his pains!—you remember how he never took much thought about anything, except to make sure that he did his work conscientiously, ran into no debts, acted honourably to all men and stood well with the world. He was the stupidest creature extant,—he believed in the possibility of

happiness!—he loved, and fancied himself beloved! He was duped and deceived,—all such trusting noodles are!—and he took his whipping and scourging at the hands of Fate rather badly. But he learnt wisdom at last,—the wisdom of the wisest!—he found out that men were sots and knaves, and women coquettes and wantons, and he resolved to make the best of an eternally bad business and please himself since he could please nobody else. And he has succeeded! —here he is!—here *I* am to answer for the truth of his success! I am very happy!—one does not want a new coat to be contented. I have heard say that a woman always judges a man by his clothes,—but if you judge me by mine you will do wrongly. They are shabby, I admit—but I am at ease in them, and they serve me better than a court suit serves a lacquey. I look ill, you tell me,—but I am not ill;—the face is always a tell-tale in matters of dissipation,—and I do not deny that I am dissipated,"—here I laughed harshly as I

met her grieved and wondering gaze,—"I live a fast life,—I consort with evil men and evil women,—that is, people who do not, like the hypocritical higher classes of society, waste valuable time in pretending to be good. I am a gamester,—an idler—a *fainéant* of the Paris *cafés*,—I have taken my life in my own hands and torn it up piecemeal for any dog to devour,—and to conclude, I am an *absintheur*, by which term, if you understand it at all, you will obtain the whole clue to the mystery of my present existence. Absinthe-drinking is a sort of profession as well as amusement in Paris,—it is followed by a great many men both small and great,—men of distinction, as well as nobodies,—I am in excellent company, I assure you!—and, upon my word, when I think of my past silly efforts to keep in a straight line of law with our jaded system of morals and behaviour, and compare it with my present freedom from all restraint and responsibility, I have nothing—positively nothing to regret!"

During this tirade, the fair woman's face beside me had grown paler and paler,—her lips were firmly pressed together,—her eyes cast down. When I had finished, I waited, expecting to hear some passionate burst of reproach from her, but none came. She took up her book, methodically marked the place in it where she had left off reading, —put on her hat, (though I noticed her hands trembled) and then rising, she said simply—

"Adieu!"

I stared at her amazed.

"Adieu!" I echoed—"What do you mean? Do you think I can let you go without more words than these after so many weeks of separation? It was in June I last saw you,—and it is now close upon the end of September,—and what a host of tragedies, have been enacted since then! Tragedies!—aye!—murders and suicides!" —and with an involuntary gesture of appeal I stretched out my hand,—"Do not go Héloïse!—not yet! I want to speak to

you!—I want to ask you a thousand things!"

"Why?" she queried in a mechanical sort of way—"You say you have nothing to regret!"

I stood mute. Her eyes now rested on me steadfastly enough, yet with a strained piteousness in them that disturbed me greatly.

"You have nothing to regret,"—she repeated listlessly—"Old days are over for you—as they are for me! In the space of a few months the best, the happiest part of our lives has ended. Only"—and she caught her breath hard—"before I go—I will say one thing—it is that I am sorry I cursed you or seemed to curse you. It was wrong,—though indeed it is not I that would have driven you to spoil your life as you yourself have spoiled it. I know you suffered bitterly—but I had hoped you were man enough to overcome that suffering and make yourself master of it. I knew you were deceived—but I had thought you

generous enough to have pardoned deceit. You seemed to me a brave and gallant gentleman,—I was not prepared to find your nature weak and—and cowardly!"

She hesitated before the last word,—but, as she uttered it, I smiled.

"True, quite true, Héloïse!" I said quietly —"I am a coward! I glory in it! The brave are those that run all sorts of dangerous risks for the sake of others,—or for a cause, the successful results of which they personally will not be permitted to share. I avoid all this trouble! I am 'coward' enough to wish comfort and safety for myself,—I leave the question of Honour to the arguing tongues and clashing swords of those who care about it,—I do not!"

She looked at me indignantly, and her large eyes flashed.

"Oh God!" she cried. "Is it possible you can have fallen so low!—was not your cruel vengeance sufficient? You drove Pauline from her home,—her disgrace, which you so publicly proclaimed, killed, as you

know, my uncle her father,—evil and misfortune have been sown broadcast by that one malicious act of yours,—even the wretched Silvion Guidèl has disappeared mysteriously—no trace of him can be found,—and not content with this havoc, you ruin yourself! And all for what? For a child's broken troth-plight!—a child who, as I told you at first, was too young to know her own mind, and who simply accepted you as her affianced husband, because she thought it would please her parents,—no more! She had then no idea, no conception of love;—and when it came, she fell a victim to it—it was too strong for her slight resistance. I warned you as well as I could,—I foresaw it all,—I dreaded it—for no woman as young and impressionable as Pauline could have been long in Silvion Guidèl's company without being powerfully attracted. I warned you,—but you would see nothing—men are so blind! They cannot—they will not understand that in every woman's heart there is the hunger of love—a hunger which

must be appeased. When you first met Pauline she had never known this feeling,—and you never roused it in her,—but it woke at the mere glance, the mere voice of Silvion Guidèl! These things will happen —they are always happening,—one is powerless to prevent them. If one could always love where love is advisable!—but one cannot do so! Pauline's sin was no more than that of hundreds of other women who not only win the world's pardon, but also the exoneration of the sternest judges,—and yet I am sure she has suffered with a sharper intensity than many less innocent! But you—you have nothing to regret, you say—no!—not though two homes lie wasted and deserted by your pitilessness?—and, now you have ravaged your own life too!—you might have spared that!—yes, you might have spared that,—you might have left that—to God!"

Her breast heaved, and a wave of colour rushed to her cheeks and as quickly receded, —she pressed one hand on her heart.

"You need not"—she went on pathetically—"have given me cause to-day to even imagine that perhaps my foolish curse did harm to you. It is a vague reproach that I shall think of often! And yet I know I spoke in haste only—and without any malicious intent,—I could not,"—here her voice sank lower and lower—"I could not have truly cursed what I once loved!"

My heart gave a fierce bound,—and then almost stood still. Loved! What she once loved! Had she, then, loved me? Certes, a glimmering guess,—a sort of instinctive feeling that she might have loved me, had stolen over me now and then during my courtship of her cousin Pauline,—but that she had really bestowed any of her affection on me unasked, was an idea that had never positively occurred to my mind. And now? . . . We looked at each other,—she with a strange pale light on her face such as I had never seen there,—I amazed, yet conscious of immense, irreparable loss,—loss which those words of hers—"what I once loved"

—made absolute and eternal! Both vaguely conscience-smitten, we gazed into one another's eyes,—even so might two spirits, one on the gold edge of Heaven, the other on the red brink of Hell, and all Chaos between them, gaze wistfully and wonder at their own froward fate,—aye !—and such, if such there be, may lean far out from either sphere, stretch hands, waft kisses, smile, weep, cry aloud each other's names,—and yet no bridge shall ever span the dark division,—no ray of light connect those self-severed souls !

"Héloïse!" I stammered,—and then, my voice failing me, I was silent.

She, moving restlessly where she sat on the rustic seat with the shadows of the green leaves flickering over her, entwined her white hands one within the other, and lifted her large solemn eyes towards the deep blue sky.

"There is no shame in it now"—she said, in hushed serious accents. "There is never any shame in what is dead. The darkest

sin,—the worst crime—is expiated by death, —and so my love, being perished, is no longer blameable. I have not seen you for a long time—and perhaps I shall never see you again,—one tells many lies in life, and one seldom has the chance of speaking the truth,—but I feel that I must speak it now. I loved you !—you see how calmly I can say it—how dispassionately—because it is past. The old heart-ache troubles me no longer,—and I am not afraid of you any more. But before,—I used to be afraid,—I used to think you must be able to guess my secret, and that you despised me for it. You loved Pauline,—she was much worthier love than I,—and I should have been quite contented and at rest had I felt certain that she loved you in return. But I never was certain ; I felt that her affection was merely that of a playful child for an elder brother,—I felt sure that she knew nothing of love,—love such as you had for her—or—as I had for you. But you—you saw nothing—— "

She stopped abruptly, for I suddenly

flung myself down on the seat beside her, and now caught her hands in mine.

"Nothing—nothing!" I muttered wildly. "We men never do see anything! We are bats,—moths!—flying desperately into all sorts of light and fire and getting burnt and withered up for our pains! Héloïse! Héloïse!—You loved me, you say—*you?*—Why, just for the merest hair's-breadth of mercy extended to us, I might have loved you!—we might have been happy! Why do you pray to God, Héloïse?—how can you pray to Him? Seeing you, knowing you, hearing you, why did He not save me by your grace as by an angel's intervention? He could have done so had He willed it!—and I should have believed in Him then! And you—why did you not give me one look—one word!—why did you not employ all the thousand charms of your loveliness to attract me?—why were you always so silent and cold?—was that your mode of defence against yourself and me, child? Oh, my God!—what a waste and havoc of

life there is in the world! Listen!—there are plenty of women who by a thousand coquetteries and unmistakable signs, give us men plainly to understand what they mean,—and we are only too ready to obey their signals—but you—you, because you are good and innocent, must needs shut up your soul in a prison of ice for the sake of—what? Conventionality,—social usage! A curse on conventionality! Héloïse—Héloïse!—if I had only known!—if I could have guessed that I might have sought your love and found it!—but now!—why have told me now, you beautiful, fond, foolish woman, when it is too late!"

I was breathless with the strange excitement that had seized me,—though I held myself as much as I could in strong restraint, fearing to alarm her by my vehemence,—but my whole soul was so suddenly overpowered by the extent of the desolation I myself had wrought, that I could not check the torrent of words that broke from my lips. It maddened me to

realize, as I did, that we two had always been on the verge of love unknowingly,—and yet, by reason of something in ourselves that refused to yield to the attraction of each other's presence, and something in the whim of chance and circumstance, we had wilfully let love go beyond all possible recall! And she,—oh, she was cold and calm,—or if she were not, she had the nerve to seem so,—all your delicately-strung student-women are like that; so full of fine philosophies that they are scarcely conscious of a heart! Her face was quite colourless,—she looked like an exquisitely wrought figure of marble,—her hand lay passively in mine, chill as a frozen snowflake.

"Why"—I repeated half savagely—"why have you told me all this now, when it is too late?"

Her lips trembled apart, — but for a moment no sound issued from them. Then with a slight effort she answered me.

"It is just because it is too late that I have told you,—it is because my love is

dead, that I have chosen you should know that it once lived. If there were the smallest pulse of life stirring in it now, you should never have known."

And she withdrew her hand from my clasp as she spoke.

"You are a strange woman Héloïse!" I said involuntarily.

"Possibly I may be," she replied, with a sudden quiver of passion in her voice that added richness to its liquid thrill. "And yet again, perhaps not as strange as you imagine. There are many women who can love without blazoning their love to the world,—there are many too who will die for love and give no sign of suffering. But we need speak no more of this. I only wished to prove to you how impossible it was that I could ever seriously and maliciously have wished you ill,—and to ask you, for the sake of the past, to refrain from perpetrating fresh injuries on your life and soul. Surely, however much a man has been wronged by others, he need not wrong himself!"

"If his life were of any value to any one in the world he need not and he would not," I responded. "But when it is a complete matter of indifference to everybody whether he lives or dies—*que voulez-vous?* I tell you, Héloïse, I have gone too far for remedy,—even if you loved me now, which you do not, you could not raise me from the depths into which I have fallen, and where I am perfectly contented to remain."

Her eyes flashed with mingled indignation and sorrow.

"I thank God my love for you has perished then!" she exclaimed passionately. "For had I still loved you, it would have killed me to see you degraded as you are to-day!"

I smiled a little contemptuously.

"*Chère* Héloïse, do not talk of degradation!" I murmured. "Or if we must talk of it,—let us consider the fate of—Pauline!"

She started, as though I had stabbed her with a dagger's point.

"Have you seen her? Do you know where she is?" she demanded eagerly.

"Yes—and no," I replied. "I have seen her twice,—but I have not spoken to her, nor do I know where she lives. I saw her, the first time, wandering shabbily clad, in the back streets of Paris"—Héloïse uttered a faint cry and tears sprang into her eyes,—"and when I beheld her for the second time, she was kneeling outside her father's grave at Père-la-Chaise. But I intend to track her out;—I will find her, wherever she is!"

Oh, what a happy hopeful light swept over the fair pale face beside me.

"You will?" she cried. "You will find her?—you will restore her to her mother?—to me?—the poor poor unhappy child! Ah, Gaston!—if you do this, you will surely make your peace with God!"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"*Ma chère*, there is time enough for that! *Monsieur le bon Dieu* and I have not quarrelled that I am aware of,—and if we

had, we should perhaps not be very anxious to renew our friendship! I would rather make my peace with you. If I find Pauline, will you love me again?"

She gave a faint exclamation and recoiled from me as though afraid.

"Oh no!—never—never!" she said shudderingly. "Never! What power can revive a perished passion, Gaston Beauvais? Once dead—it is dead for ever! You are to me the merest phantom of the man I once adored in secret,—I could no more love you now than I could love a corpse long buried!"

She spoke with vehemence and fervour,—and every pulse in my body seemed to rebound with a smarting sense of anger against her. I felt that though she had as she said, once loved me, she now regarded me with something near positive aversion, though that aversion was mingled with a pity which I scorned. She was unjust,—all women are! The subtle nerves of her feminine organization had been wrenched

and twisted awry by disappointed passion quite as much as mine had,—and I could read and analyze her emotion—I saw she instinctively despised herself for ever having bestowed a single tender thought on such a piece of unworthiness as I! No matter! —I would meet her on her own ground!— if she could not love me, she should fear me!

"*Merci, chère et belle amie!*" I said satirically. "We have—for no reason that I can see—played a veritable game of cat and mouse together. You have caught me in your pearly claws—and you have purred prettily concerning your past affection for me,—and now you settle on me tooth and nail, and tear me into shreds of hopelessness and despair. *Soit!* It is the way of women,—I do not complain. I shall, as I told you, seek out Pauline,—but if I find her, do not imagine I shall restore her to your arms! *Pas si bête!* I shall keep her for myself. I would not have her for my wife—no!—but there is no earthly

objection to my taking her as my mistress! The idea will not shock or shame her—now!"

With one swift movement Héloïse sprang up and faced me—her whole figure trembling with suppressed emotion.

"Oh God! You would not be so base!" she cried. "You could not—you dare not!"

I rose in my turn and confronted her calmly.

"How inconsistent you are, Héloïse!" I said indolently. "Base! I see nothing base in such a proposal to such a woman as your too-much-loved young cousin! She has of her own free-will descended several steps of the ladder of perdition—no force will be needed to persuade her down to the end! You overrate the case——"

"I tell you you shall not harm her!" exclaimed Héloïse, with a sudden fierceness of grief and passion. "I too have searched for her and I will search for her still,—more ardently now that I know she must be

defended from *you!* Oh, I will be near you when you least think it!—I will track you, I will follow you,—I will do anything to save her from the additional vileness of your touch!—your——"

She paused, breathless.

I smiled.

"Do not be melodramatic, *ma chère!*" I murmured coldly. "It suits you,—you look admirably lovely in anger—but still,—we are in the Bois,—and there may be listeners. I shall be charmed if you will follow me and track me out, as you say—but,—you will find it difficult! You cannot save what is hopelessly lost,—and as for 'daring'!—*Dieu!* how little you know me!—there is nothing I dare not do,—nothing, save one thing!"

She stood still,—her eyes dilated,—her breath coming and going quickly, her hands clenched,—but she said not a word.

"You do not ask what that one thing is," I went on, keeping my gaze upon her. "But I will tell you. The limit of

my courage—such as it is,—stops with you. I dare not,—mark me well!—I dare not affront you,—so that, however much my heart may ache and hunger for love, I dare not love you! You are the one sacred thing on earth to me, and so you will remain—for I have voluntarily resigned home and kindred—my father has disowned me, as completely as I have disowned him!—and only the memory of your beauty will cling to me henceforth, as something just a little less valuable and sweet than—*Absinthe!*"

I laughed, and she surveyed me amazedly.

"Than Absinthe!" she repeated mechanically. "I do not understand——"

"No, I suppose you do not," I went on quietly, "you will probably never understand how *absinthe* can become dearer to a man than his own life! It is very strange!—but in Paris, very true. You have been in dangerous company, Héloïse, to-day!—be thankful you have escaped all harm! You have talked of past love and passion to a

man who has fire in his veins instead of blood,—and who, had he once let slip the leash of difficult self-control, might have thought little of taking his fill of kisses from your lips, and killing you afterwards! Do not look so frightened,—I dare not touch you,—I dare not even kiss your hand! You are free as angels are,—free to depart from me in peace and safety,—with what poor blessing a self-ruined man may presume to invoke upon you. But do not ask me to consider Pauline as I consider you,—you might as easily expect me to pardon Silvion Guidèl!"

She was silent,—I think from sheer terror this time,—and a restless inquisitiveness stirred in me,—an anxiety to find out how much she knew concerning the mysterious disappearance of that once holy saint of the Church whom I had sent to find out in other worlds the causes of his Creed!

"What has become of him, do you think?" I said suddenly. "Perhaps he is dead?"

How pale she looked!—how scared and strange!

"Perhaps!" she murmured half inaudibly.

"Perhaps"—I went on recklessly,—and laughing as I spoke,—"Perhaps he is *murdered!* Have you ever thought of that? It is quite possible!"

And at that instant our eyes met! What!—was my crime blazoned in my face? I could not tell,—I only know that she uttered a smothered cry,—an exclamation of fear or horror, or both,—and with a movement of her hands, as though she thrust some hideous object away from her, she turned and fled! I saw the sunlight flash on her hair like the heavenly halo above the forehead of an angel,—I heard the rustle of her dress sweep with a swift shuddering hiss over the long grass that bent beneath her tread,—she was gone! In her haste she had left behind her the book she had been reading, and I took it up mechanically. It was a translation of Plato,—it opened of its own accord at a passage she had marked.

"*When one is attempting noble things, it is surely noble also to suffer whatever it may befall us to suffer.*"

Aye!—for the grand old Greeks this was truth,—but for modern men what does it avail? Who attempts "noble things" nowadays without being deemed half mad for his or her effort? And as for suffering there is surely enough of that without going out of one's way in search of it! Good Plato!—you are not in favour at this period of time,—your philosophies are as unacceptable to our "advanced" condition as Christ's christianity! So I thought;—but I took the volume with me all the same,—it had the signature of "Héloïse St. Cyr"—written on its fly-leaf in a firm characteristic woman's hand,—and I had a superstitious idea that it might act like a talisman to shield me from evil. Folly of course!—for there is no talisman in earth or in heaven that can defend a man from the baser part of himself. And to that baser part I had succumbed,—and I had no repentance—

no!—not though I should have sacrificed the love of a thousand women as fair and pure-souled as this strange girl Héloïse, who had loved me once, and whose love I myself had turned into hatred. And yet,—yet—I was more awake to the knowledge of my own utter vileness than I had ever been before, as with the Plato in my hand, and my hat pulled low down over my brows I went slinkingly by side-paths and byeways out of the Bois like the accursëd thing I was,—accursëd, and for once, fully conscious of my curse!

VI.

Weeks went past; with me their progress was scarcely noticed, for I lived in a sort of wild nightmare of delirium that could no more be called life than fever is called health. I was beginning to learn a few of the heavier penalties attached to the passion that absorbed me,—and the mere premonitory symptoms of those penalties were terrifying enough to shake the nerves of many a bolder man than I. I drank more and more Absinthe to drown my sensations, —sometimes I obtained a stupefying result with the required relief, but that relief was only temporary. The visions that now haunted me were more varied and unnatural in character,—yet it was not so much of visions I had to complain as *impressions*.

These were forcible, singular, and alarmingly realistic. For example, I would be all at once seized by the notion that everything about me was of absurdly abnormal proportions, or the reverse; men and women would, as I looked at them, suddenly assume the appearance of monsters both in height and breadth, and again, would reduce themselves in the twinkling of an eye to the merest pigmies. This happened frequently,—I knew it was only an *impression* or distortion of the brain-images, but it was nevertheless troublesome and confusing. Then there were the crowds of persons I saw who were *not* real,—and whom I classed under the head of "visions,"—but, whereas once there was a certain order and method in the manner of their appearance, there was now none,—they rushed before me in disorderly masses, with faces and gestures that were indescribably hideous and revolting. Therefore my chief aim now was to try and deaden my brain utterly,—I was tired of the torture and

perplexity its subtle mechanism caused me to suffer. Meanwhile I gained some little distraction by searching everywhere for Pauline,—this was the only object apart from Absinthe that interested me in the least. The rest of the world was the most tiresome pageantry-show,—sometimes dim and indistinct—sometimes luridly brilliant,—but always spectral,—always like a thing set apart from me with which I had no connection whatsoever.

So, imperceptibly to my consciousness, the summer faded and died,—and autumn also came to its sumptuously coloured end in a glory of gold and crimson foliage, which fell to the ground almost before one had time to realize its rich beauty. A chill November began, attended with pale fog and drizzling rain,—the leaves lately so gay of tint, dropped in dead heaps, or drifted mournfully on the sweeping wings of the gusty blast,—the little tables outside all the *cafés* were moved within, and the sombreness of approaching winter began

to loom darkly over Paris, not that Paris ever cares particularly for threatening skies or inclement weather, its bright interior life bidding defiance to the dullest day. If you have even a very moderate income, just sufficient to rent the tiniest *maisonette* in Paris, you can live more agreeably there perhaps than in any other city in the world. You are certain to have lively colouring about you — for no little "appartement" in Paris but is cheerful with painted floral designs, gilding, and mirrors,—if you be a woman your admirers will bring you white lilac and orchids in the middle of December, arranged with that perfectly fine French taste which is unequalled throughout the globe,—and on a frosty day your *cuisinière* will make you a "*bouillon*" such as no English cook has any idea of,—while, no matter whether you be on the topmost floor of the tallest house, you need only look out of window to see some piece of merriment or other afoot,—for we Parisians, whatever our faults, are

merry enough,—and even when, monkey-like, we tear some grand ideal to bits and throw it in the gutter, we always grin over it! We dance on graves,—we snap our fingers in the face of the criminal who is just going to be guillotined—why not? "Tout casse, tout passe!"—we may as well laugh at the whole Human Comedy while we can! Now I, for example, have never been in England,—but I have read much about it, and I have met many English people, and on the whole I am inclined to admire "*perfide Albion.*" Her people are so wise in their generation! When your English lord is conscious of having more vices in his composition than there are days in the year, he builds a church and endows a hospital!—can anything be more excellent? He becomes virtuous at once in the eyes of the world at large, and yet he need never resign one of his favourite little peccadilloes! We do not manage these things quite so well in France,—we are *blagueurs*—even if we are vicious, *nous*

blaguons le chose! How much better it is to be secretive *à l'Anglaise!*—to appear good no matter how bad we are,—and to seem as though all the Ten Commandments were written on our brows even while we are coveting our neighbour's wife! But I digress. I ought to keep to the thread of my story, ought I not, dear critics on the press?—you who treat every narrative, true or imaginative that goes into print, as a *gourmet* treats a quail, leaving nothing on the plate but a fragment of picked bone which you present to the public and call it a "review!" *Ah mes garçons!*—take care! Do not indulge your small private spites and jealousies too openly, or you may lose your occupation, which, though it only pay you at the rate of half-a-guinea a column, and sometimes less, is still an occupation. The Public itself is the Supreme Critic now,—its "review" does not appear in print, but nevertheless its unwritten verdict declares itself with such an amazing weight of influence, that the

ephemeral opinions of a few ill-paid journalists are the merest straws beating against the strong force of a whirlwind. Digression again? Yes!—what else do you expect of an *absintheur?* I do not think I am more discursive than Gladstone of Hawarden, or more flighty than Boulanger of Jersey! *Allons,*—I will try to be explicit and tell you how pretty schoolgirl Pauline de Charmilles ended her troubles,—but I confess I have dallied with the subject purposely. Why? Why, because I hate yet rejoice to think of it,—because I dwell on it with loving and with loathing,—because it makes me laugh with ecstasy—and anon, weep and tremble and implore!—though what I implore, and to whom I address any sort of appeal, I cannot explain to you. Sometimes cowering on the ground I wail aloud—"Oh God—God!" half credulous, half despairing,—and then when the weak paroxysm is past, and the pitiless blank Silence of things hurls itself down on my soul as the crush-

ing answer to my cry, I rise to my feet, calm, tearless, and myself again—knowing that there is *no* God!—none at least that ever replies to the shriek of torture or the groan of misery. How strange it is that there are some folks who still continue to pray!

One cold dark evening,—how minutely I remember every small incident connected with it!—I was wandering home in my usual desultory fashion, a little more heavily drugged than usual, and in a state of sublime indifference to the weather, which was wet and gusty, when I heard a woman's voice singing in one of the bye-streets down which I generally took my way. There was something sweet and liquid in the thrill of the notes as they rose upward softly through the mist and rain,—and I could hear the words of the song distinctly,—it was a well-known convent chant to the "Guardian Angel;"—these heavenly messengers seem rather idle in the world nowadays!

" Viens sur ton aile, Ange fidèle
Prendre mon cœur !
C'est le plus ardent de mes vœux ;—
Près de Marie
Place-moi bientôt dans les cieux !
O guide aimable, sois favorable
A mon désir
Et viens finir
Ma triste vie
Avec Marie ! "

A wavering child-like pathos in the enunciation of the last lines struck me with a sense of familiarity ;—involuntarily I thought of Héloïse and of the way she used to play the violin, and of the pleasant musical evenings we used to pass all together at the house of the De Charmilles. I sauntered into the street and down it lazily—the woman who sang was standing at the side of the curbstone, and there were a few people about her listening ;—one or two dropped coins in her timidly outstretched hand. As I came close within view of her I stopped and stared, doubtful for a moment as to her identity,—then, in doubt no longer, I sprang to her side.

"Pauline!" I exclaimed.

She started, and shuddered back from me, her face growing paler than ever, her eyes opening wide in wistful wonder and fear. The little group that had listened to her song broke up and dispersed,—they had no particular interest in her more than in any other wandering street-vocalist, and in less than a minute we were almost alone.

"Pauline!" I said again,—then, breaking into a derisive laugh, I went on—"What!—has it come to this?—you, the sole daughter of a proud and ancient house, singing in the highways and the byeways for bread! *Dieu!*—one would have thought there were more comfortable ways of earning a living—for you at any rate!—you, with your fair face and knowledge of evil could surely have done better than this!"

She looked at me steadfastly but made no answer,—she was apparently as amazed and stricken at the sight of me as her cousin Héloïse had been. Meanwhile I surveyed her

with a swift yet intent scrutiny—I noticed her shabby, almost threadbare clothes,—the thin starved look of her figure,—the lines of suffering about her mouth and eyes,—and yet with all this she was still beautiful,—beautiful as an angel or fairy over whom the cloud of sorrow hangs like blight on a flower.

"Well!" I resumed roughly, after waiting in vain for her to speak,—"we have met at last, it seems! I have searched for you everywhere—so have your relatives and friends. You have kept the secret of your hiding-place very well all these months—no doubt for some good reason! Who is your lover?"

Still the same steadfast look,—the same plaintive, patient uplifting of the eyes!

"My lover?" she echoed after me softly and with surprise. "If you are, as I suppose you must be, Gaston Beauvais, then you know—you have always known his name. Whom can I love—who can love me,—if not Silvion?"

I laughed again.

"*Bien!* You can love the dead then? Nay!—you are too fair to waste your beauty thus! A corpse can give no caresses,—and *le beau* Silvion by this time is something less even than a corpse! How you stare! Did you not know that he was dead?"

Her face grew grey as ashes,—and rigid in the extremity of her fear.

"Dead!" she gasped. "No—no! That could not be! Dead? Silvion? No, no! —you are cruel—you always were cruel—you are Gaston Beauvais, the cruellest of all cruel men, and you tell me lies to torture me! You were always glad to torture me!—yes, even after you had loved me! I never could understand that—for if one loves at all, one always forgives. And so I do not believe you,—Silvion is not dead,—he could not die—he is too young——"

"Oh, little fool!"—I interrupted her fiercely—"do not the young die? The

young, the strong, and the beautiful, like your Silvion, are generally the first to go ;—they are too good, say the old women, for this wicked world! Too good!—ha ha!—the axiom is excellent in the case of Silvion Guidèl, who was so perfect a saint! Come here, Pauline!"—and I seized her hand. "Do not try to resist me, or it will be the worse for you! One look at my face will tell you what I have become,—as vile a man as you are a woman!—scum, both of us, on the streets of Paris! Come with me, I tell you! Scream or struggle, and as sure as these clouds drop rain from heaven I will kill you! I never had much mercy in my disposition—I dare say you remember that!—I have less than ever now. There are many things I must say to you,—things which you must hear,—which you *shall* hear!—come to some remoter place than this, where we shall not be noticed,—where no one will interrupt us, or think that we are more than two beggars discoursing of the day's gains!"

And clutching her arm I half dragged, half led her with me,—I myself full of a strange rising fury that savoured of madness,—she almost paralyzed, I think, with sheer terror. Out of the street we hurried,—and passed into a small obscure side-alley or court, from the corner of which could be perceived the shimmer of the Seine and the lights on the Pont Neuf.

"Now!" I said hoarsely, drawing her by force up so near to me that our faces were close together, and our eyes, peering into each other's, seemed to ravage out as by fire the secrets hidden in our hearts—"now let us speak the truth, you and I,—and since you were always the most graceful liar of the two, perhaps you had best begin! Fling off the mask, Pauline de Charmilles!—make open confession, and so in part mend the wounds of your soul!—tell me how you have lived all this while and what you have been doing? I know your past,—I can imagine your present!—but—speak out! Tell me how Paris has

treated you,—what you *were* I can remember,—and all I want to know now, is what you *are!*"

How strangely quiet she had become!—this once playful, childish, coquettish creature I had loved! She never flinched beneath my gaze,—she never tried to draw her hands away from mine—her features were colourless, but her lips were firmly set, and no tears dimmed the feverish lustre of her eyes.

"What I am?" she murmured in faint yet clear accents. "I am what I have always been,—a poor, broken-hearted woman who is faithful!"

Faithful! I flung her hands from me in derision,—I stared at her, amazed at her effrontery.

"Faithful" I echoed. "You! You, who sported with a man's heart as though it were a toy,—you, who ruined an honest man's life to gratify a selfish, guilty passion, —you!—you dare to speak of faithfulness—you——"

"Stop!" she said softly and with perfect composure. "I think you do not understand,—it is seldom men can understand women. In selfishness, if we speak of that, you are surely more to blame than I,—for you think of nothing but your own wrong —a wrong for which, God knows, I would have made any possible reparation. And I repeat it, I am faithful! You cannot, you dare not call the woman false who is true to the memory of the only love she ever yielded herself to, body and soul! She who surrenders her life to many lovers—she it is who is unfaithful—she it is who is base,—but not such an one as I! For I have had but one passion,—one thought—one hope—one thread to bind me to existence,—Silvion! You know, for I told you all the truth, that my love was never centred upon you,—you know that I had never wakened to the least comprehension of love till he, Silvion, made me see all its glory, all its misery!—and neither he nor I are to blame for our unhappy destiny!

Blame Nature, blame Fate, blame God, blame Love itself,—the joy, the despair of it all was to be! But faithfulness! Ah, Gaston Beauvais!—if ever any woman in the world was faithful, *I* am that woman! I can keep that one poor pride to comfort me when I die! If, in these weary months any other man's hand had touched mine with a gesture of affection,—if another man's lips had touched mine with the lightest caress—then,—then you might have spurned me as a vile and fallen thing—then you would have had the right to loathe me as I should have loathed myself! But I am as one vowed and consecrated—yes! consecrated to love, and to love's companion, sorrow,—and though I have, against my wish and will, brought grief to you and many who once were dear to me, I am faithful!—faithful to the one passion of my life, and I shall be faithful still until the end!"

Oh, quixotic fool! I thought, as I heard her impassioned words fall one by one, musically on the careless air. Why she

might have been a saint for her fearless and holy look!—she of the corrupt heart and wayward will — even she,—it was laughable!—she might have been a saint! My God!—for one wild fleeting moment I thought her so,—for a comparison between her life and mine passed over me, and caused me to recoil from her as one unworthy to be near so pure a thing! Pure? —what? Because she had been true to her betrayer? Fine purity, indeed!—what was I dreaming of? The rain and mist were dark about us,—no heavenly aureole shone above her brows—she was a mere bedraggled wretch with a worn face, feigning a wondrous honesty! Faithful? Faithful to—that bruised and battered thing I had flung out into the river with such infinite trouble!—faithful,—to that forbidding lump of clay thrown long ago into the common grave of nameless suicides! What a jest!—what a mockery! I looked at her as she stood before me—as frail and slight a woman as ever was born to misery.

"So! And with all this famous fidelity you boast of, how have you lived?" I asked her derisively.

"I have worked," she replied simply—"and when I could get no work, I have sung, as you saw me to-night, in the poorer streets,—for the poor are more generous than the rich,—and many people have been very good to me. And sometimes I have starved,—but I have always hoped and waited——"

"For what?" I cried. "Oh, most foolish of all foolish women,—waited and hoped for what?"

"For one glimpse of Silvion!" and she raised her eyes with a trustful light in their dark blue depths to the murky and discontented heavens. "I have always felt that some day he would come to Paris,—and that I should see his face once more! I would ask him for nothing but a word of blessing,—I would not call him from the life he has been compelled to choose, and I would not reproach him for choosing it,—

I should be quite, quite happy just to kiss his hand and let him go!—but—I should have seen him! Then I would go into some quiet convent of the poor and end my days,—I would pray for him——"

"Aye!—as though he were another Abelard!" I interrupted her harshly. "Your prayers will probably take the form of Colardeau's poesy——"

"'*Un Dieu parle à mon cœur,*
'*De ce Dieu, ton rival, sois encore le vainqueur!*'

We all understand the ulterior meaning of such pretty sentiment! What!—will you actually swear to me that you have lived hidden apart like this to work and starve on the mere hope of seeing your lover again, when you know that by his own act he separated himself from you for ever?"

She did not speak; but she made a sign of patient assent.

I burst into laughter, loud, long and irresistible.

"And they say that God exists!" I cried—"A God of justice,—who allows

His creatures to torment themselves with shadows! Oh, sublime justice! Listen, listen, you, child, who hold fast to a fidelity which nowadays is counted as a mere dog's virtue,—listen, and learn from me what a spendthrift you have been of your time, and how you have wasted your prayers! Listen!—listen!" and again I caught her hands in mine and bent my face downwards to hers—"Listen, for I am in the humour to tell you everything,—everything! You have spoken,—it is my turn to speak now. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God! Do you hear that? That is a proper legal oath,—it suffices for a court of justice where not a man believes in the God adjured,—it must suffice for you who do believe—or so you say! Well then, by that oath, and by everything holy and blasphemous in this sacred and profane world of ours I swear to you Silvion Guidèl is dead! You can think his soul is in heaven if you like,—if it console you so to think,—but wherever

his soul is, his body is dead, — and it was his fine, fair body you knew,—his body you loved,—you surely will not be such a hypocrite as to deny that! Well, that body is dead,—dead and turned to hideous corruption!—Ha!—you shudder?—you struggle?"— for she was striving to tear her hands from my grip. "Perhaps you can guess how he died? Not willingly, I assure you!—he was not by any means glad to go to the paradise whose perfect joys he proclaimed! No!—he was a rebellious priest,—he fought for every breath of the strong, rich, throbbing life that made mere manhood glorious to him,—but he was conquered!—he gave in at last—— Silence!—do not scream, or I shall kill you! He is dead, I say!—stone dead!—who should know it better than I, seeing that I—*murdered* him!"

VII.

What fools women are! To break their hearts is sometimes as easy as to break fine glass,—a word will do it. A mere word!—one uttered at random out of the thousands in the dictionary! "*Murder*," for example,—a word of six letters,—it has a ludicrously appalling effect on human nerves! On the silly Pauline it fell like a thunderbolt sped suddenly from the hand of God;—and down she dropped at my feet, white as snow, inert as stone. I might have struck her across the brows with a heavy hammer, or pierced her body with some sharp weapon, she lay so stunned and helpless. The sight of her figure there, huddled in a motionless heap, made me angry,—she looked as though she were dead. I was not sorry for

her; no!—I was sorry for nothing now;—but I lifted her up from the wet pavement in my arms, and held her close against my breast in a mechanical endeavour to warm her back to consciousness.

"Poor, pretty little toy!" I thought, as I chafed one of her limp cold hands,—and then—hardly knowing what I did, I kissed her. Some subtle honey or poison, or both, was surely on her lips, for as I touched them I grew mad! What!—only one kiss for me who had been deprived of them so long? No!—ten, twenty, a hundred! I rained them down on cheeks, eyes, brow and hair,—though I might as well have kissed a corpse, she was so still and cold. But she breathed,—her heart beat against mine,—I could feel its faint pulsations; and I renewed my kisses with the ardour, not of love, but of hatred! You do not think it possible to kiss a woman you hate? Fair lady!—(for it cannot be one of my sex that suggests the doubt!) you know little of men! We are, when roused, tigers in our

loves and hatreds,—and we are quite capable of embracing a woman whom we mentally loathe, so long as she has physical attraction, —aye!—the very fact of our loathing will oftentimes redouble the fascination we have for her company! Oh, we are not all lath-and-plaster men, with a stereotyped smile and company manners! The most seeming-cold of us have strange depths of passion in our natures which, if once stirred, leap into flame and destroy all that is within our reach! Such fire was in me now as my lips almost breathlessly caressed the fair face that lay against my heart like a white flower,—and when at last the dark blue eyes opened and regarded me, first with vague doubt and questioning, then with affright and abhorrence, a sense of the fiercest triumph was in me,—a triumph which grew hotter with every instant, as I reflected that now—now at any rate Pauline was in my power—I could make her mine if I choose!—she had been faithful to Silvion living, but she should not remain faithful to him dead! I held her

fast in my arms with all my strength,—with all my strength?—my strength was as a reed in the wind before the sudden access of superhuman power that rushed upon her as she recovered from her swoon! She broke from my clasp,—she pushed me violently from her, and then stood irresolute, feebly pressing her hand against her eyes as though in an effort to recall her thoughts.

"Silvion—dead!" she muttered,—"dead!—and I never knew! No warning given—no message—no spirit-voice in the night to tell me—Oh no!—God would not be so cruel! Dead!—and—*murdered!* Ah no!" and her accents rose to a shrill wail—"it cannot be true!—it cannot! Gaston Beauvais, it was not you who spoke—it was some horrid fancy of my own!—you did not say it—you could not say it——"

She stopped, panting for breath. My blood burned as I looked at her,—in her agony and terror she was so beautiful! How wild and brilliant were those lovely eyes!—

I took a fierce delight in pricking her on to such adorable frenzy!

"I said, Pauline, what I will say again, that your lover Silvion Guidèl is dead, and that it was I who killed him! Without a weapon, too,—with these hands alone!—and yet see!—there is no blood upon them!"

I held them out to her,—she craned her neck forward and looked at them strangely, with a peering horror in her eyes that seemed to make them fixed and glassy. Then a light flashed over her face—her lips parted in a shrill scream.

"Murderer!" she cried, clapping her hands wildly,—"Murderer! You have confessed—you shall atone! You shall die for your crime—I will have justice! *Au secours! au secours!*"

I sprang upon her swiftly—I covered her mouth—I grasped her slim throat and stifled her shrieks.

"Silence, fool!" I whispered hoarsely. "I told you I would kill you if you screamed. Another sound, another movement, and I will

keep my word. What are you shouting for?—what do you want with justice? There is no such thing, either in earth or heaven! Silvion Guidèl is dead and buried, but who can prove that he was murdered? He was buried as a suicide. If I tell you I killed him, I can tell others a different story, and your denunciation of me will seem mere hysterical raving! Be still!" Here, as I felt her swaying unsteadily beneath my touch, I took my hands from her mouth and throat and let her go. She tottered and sank down on the pavement, shuddering in every limb, and crouching there, moaned to herself like a sick and suffering child. I waited a minute or two, listening. Had any one heard her scream? I half expected some officious gendarme to appear, and inquire what was the matter,—but no!—nothing disturbed the dark stillness but the roar of passing traffic and the plash of the slow rain. Satisfied at last that all was safe, I turned to her once more, this time with something of derision.

"Why do you lie there?" I asked her —"you were warmer in my arms a few moments ago! I have stolen the kisses your Silvion left on those pretty lips of yours,—you did well to keep them from the touch of other men,—they were reserved for me! Fragrant as roses I found them, but somewhat cold! But you must wish to hear news of Silvion,—let me tell you of him. You were right,—he did come to Paris."

She made no reply, but rocked herself to and fro, still shivering and moaning.

"There is a pretty nook near Suresnes"— I went on. "The trees there have sheltered and hidden the shame of your love many and many a time. There are grassy nooks, and the birds build their nests to the sound of their own singing,—the river flows softly, and in the early morning when the bells are ringing for mass, the scene is fair enough to tempt even a prude to wantonness. Are you weeping? Ah!—we always grow sentimental over the scene of our pleasantest

sins! We love the spot,—we are drawn to it by some fatal yet potent fascination, and after an interval of absence, we return to it with a lingering fond desire to see it once again. Yes, I know!—Silvion Guidèl knew,—and even so, he, in good time returned."

Still no answer! Still the same shuddering movement and restless moaning.

"I met him there"—I pursued,—I was beginning to take a fantastic pleasure in my own narrative. "It was night, and the moon was shining. It must have looked different when you kept your secret trystes, —for you chose the freshest hours of the day, when all your friends and relatives believed you were praying for them at mass like the young saint you seemed to be—it was all sunshine and soft wind for you,—but for me—well! the stars are but sad cold worlds in the sky, and the moon has a solemn face in spite of her associations with lovers,— and so I found there was something suggestive of death in the air when I chanced upon

le beau Silvion! We spoke together; he had strange ideas of the possibility of mingling his love with his sworn duty to the Church,—indeed, he seemed to think that God would be on his side if he gave up his vocation altogether and returned to you. —Are you in pain that you keep up such a constant moaning?—But I soon convinced him that he was wrong, and that the Divine aid was always to be had for the right, providing the right was strong enough to hold its own! And for the nonce, this strong right found its impersonation in *me*. We did not quarrel,—there was no time for that. We said what we had to say and there an end. Life,—the life of a sensual priest—presented itself to me as a citadel to be stormed;—I attacked, he defended it. I had no weapon—neither had he,—my hands alone did the work of justice. For it must have been justice, according to the highest religious tenets, else God would not have permitted it, and my strength would have been rendered useless by Divine

interposition! Now in France they guillotine criminals,—in England they hang them,—in the East they strangle them—it is all one, so long as the business of breathing is stopped. I remembered this—and adopted the Eastern method—it was hard work I can assure you, to strangle a man without rope or bowstring!—it took me time to do it, and it was difficult,—also, it was very difficult for him to die!"

"Oh *God!*" The cry was like the last exclamation wrung from a creature dying on the inquisitional rack of torture,—it was terrible, even to me,—and for a moment I paused, my blood chilled by that awful, despairing groan. But the demon within me urged on my speech again, and I resumed with an air of affected indifference.

"All difficulties come to an end, of course, like everything else—and his were soon terminated. He died at last. I flung his body in the Seine,—well, what now?" for she suddenly sprang erect, and stared at me with a curiously vague yet hunted look, like

some trapped wild animal meditating an escape. "You must not leave me yet,—you have not heard all. So!—stand still as you are,—you look like a young tragic Muse!—you are beautiful,—quite inspired! — I almost believe you are glad to know your betrayer is dead! I threw his body in the Seine, I tell you; and a little while afterwards I saw it in the Morgue"—here I began to laugh involuntarily. "I swear I should scarcely have known the Raffaelle-like Silvion again! Imagine those curved red lips that used to smile at shadows like another Narcissus, all twisted and blue!—think of the supple, straight limbs, livid and swollen to twice their natural size!—by Heaven, it was astonishing—amusing!—the grossest caricature of manhood,—all save the eyes. *They* remained true to the departed covetous soul that had expressed its base desires through them,—they still uttered the last craving of the wrenched-out life that had gone,—'Love!—Love and Pauline!'"

As I said this I smiled. She stood before me like a stone image—so still that I wondered whether she had heard. Her hair had come unbound, and she fingered a tress of it mechanically.

"Love and Pauline!" I repeated, with a sort of satisfaction in the enunciation of the two words—"that is what those dead eyes said,—that is what my heart says now!—love, and Pauline! Silvion desired, and for a time possessed both,—at present it is my turn! For he is lost in the common *fosse*, among crowds of other self-slayers,—and you cannot find even his grave to weep over! Yet—strange to say—I have seen him many times since then——"

The passive form before me stirred and swayed like a slender sapling in a gust of wind—and a voice spoke hoarsely and feebly.

"Seen what?—seen whom?"

"Silvion!" I answered,—my brain suddenly darkening with phantasmal recollec-

tions as I spoke,—and, yielding to an involuntary sensation, I turned sharply round, just in time to perceive the figure of a priest outline itself dimly as though in pale phosphorescence against the dark corner of the narrow-built court where we stood. "*There!*" I cried furiously. "See you, Pauline?—There he is!—creeping along like a coward on some base errand! I have not killed him after all! There!—there! Look! He is beckoning you!"

She sprang forward,—her eyes blazing, her arms outstretched, her lips apart.

"Where? where?" she wailed. "Silvion! Silvion! Oh no, no! You torture me!—all is silence—blackness—death! Oh God—God!—is there no mercy?"

And suddenly flinging up her hands above her head, she broke into a loud peal of discordant delirious laughter and rushed violently past me out of the court. Horror or madness lent speed to her flight, for though I followed her close I could not get within touch of her. The rain and mist

seemed to enfold her as she fled, till she looked like a phantom blown before me by the wind ;—once in the open thoroughfare, one or two passengers stopped and stared after her as she ran, and after me too, doubtless ;—but otherwise gave no heed to our headlong progress. Straight on she rushed,—straight to the Pont Neuf, which on this wet and dreary night was vacant and solitary. I accelerated my steps,—I strained every nerve and sinew to overtake her, but in vain. She was like a leaf in a storm,—hurled onwards by temporary insanity, she seemed literally to have wings—to fly instead of to run—but half-way across the bridge, she paused. One flitting second —and she sprang on the parapet !

"Pauline !" I cried. "Wait ! Pauline !"

She never turned her head,—she raised her hands to heaven and clasped them as though in supplication,—then—she threw herself forward as swiftly as a bird pinioning its way into space ! One small, dull splash echoed on the silence,—she was gone ! I

reached the spot a moment after she had vanished,—I leaned over the parapet,—I peered down into the gloomy water;—nothing there! Nothing but blank stillness—blank obscurity!

"Pauline!" I muttered. "Little Pauline!"

Then, as I strained my sight over the monotonous width of the river, I saw a something lift itself into view,—a woman's robe blew upwards and outwards like a dark, wet sail—it swirled round once—twice—thrice,—and then it sank again! . . . My teeth chattered,—I clung to the stone parapet to prevent myself from falling. And yet a horrible sense of amusement stirred within me,—the satirical amusement of a fiend!—it seemed such a ludicrous thing to consider that, after all, this weak, fragile child had escaped me,—had actually gone quietly away where I could not, *dared* not follow!

"Pauline!" I whispered. "Tell me,—what is death like? Is it easy? Do you

know anything about love down there in the cold? Remember my kisses were the last on your lips,—mine, not Silvion's! God Himself can not undo that! — all Eternity cannot alter that! They will burn you in hell, they will taint you in heaven, those kisses of mine, Pauline! They will part you from Silvion!—ah!—there is their chiefest sting! You shall not be with him, —I say you shall not!"—and I almost shrieked, as the idea flashed across my perverted brain that perhaps after all the poets were right, and that lovers who loved and were faithful, met in the sight of a God who forgave them their love, and were happy together for ever. "May the whole space of heaven keep you asunder!—may the fire of God's breath sow the whirlwind between you!—may you wander apart and alone, finding paradise empty, and all immortality worthless and wearisome!—every kiss of mine on your lips be a curse, Pauline!—a curse by which I shall claim your spirit hereafter!"

Gasping for articulate speech, the wild imprecation left my lips without my realizing my own utterance; I was giddy and faint,—my temples throbbed heavily—the blood rushed to my brain,—the sky, the trees, the houses, the bridge rushed round and round me in dark whirling rings. All at once my throat filled with a cold sense of suffocation,—tears flooded my eyes, and I broke into a loud sob of fiercest agony.

"Pauline! Pauline!" I cried to the hushed and dreary waters,—"I loved you! You broke my heart! You ruined my life! You made me what I am! Pauline! Pauline! I loved you!"

The wind filled my ears with a dull roaring noise,—something black and cloudy seemed to rise palpably out of the river and sway towards me,—the pale, stern face of Silvion Guidèl came between me and the murky skies,—and with a faint groan, and a savour as of blood in my mouth, I lost my hold on thought and action, and reeled down into utter darkness, insensible.

VIII.

Dull grey lines with flecks of fire between them,—fire that radiated into all sorts of tints,—blue, green, red, and amber,—these were the first glimmerings of light on my sense of vision that roused me anew to consciousness. Vaguely, and without unclosing my eyes I studied these little points of flame as they danced to and fro on their neutral grey background ;—then, a violent shivering fit seized me, and I stirred languidly into my wretched life once more. It was morning,—very early morning—and I was still on the Pont Neuf, lying crouched close to the parapet like any hunted, suffering animal. The mists of dawn hung heavily over the river, and a few bells were ringing lazily here and there for

early mass. I struggled to my feet,—pushed my tangled hair from my eyes, and strove hard to realize what had happened. Little by little, I unravelled my knotted thoughts, and grasped at the central solution of their perplexity, — namely, this: Pauline was drowned! Pauline,—even she!—the little fairy thing that had danced and sung and flirted and prattled of her school at Vevey and her love of 'marrons glacés'—even she had become a tragic heroine, wild as any Juliet or Francesca! How strange it seemed! —as the critics would say—how *melodramatic!* For we are supposed to be living in very common-place days,—though truly this is one of the greatest errors the modern wise-acres ever indulged in. Never was there a period in which there was so much fatal complexity of thought and discussion; never was there a time in which men and women were so prone to analyze themselves and the world they inhabit with more pitiless precision and fastidious doubt and argument; and this tendency creates such

strange new desires, such subtle comparisons, such marvellous accuracy of perception, such discontent, such keen yet careless valuation of life at its best, that more romances and tragedies are enacted now than Sophocles ever dreamed of. They are performed without any very great *éclat* or stage-effects,—for we latter-day philosophers hate to give grand names to anything, our chief object of study being to destroy all ideals,—hence, we put down a suicide to temporary insanity, a murder to some hereditary disposition or wrong balance of molecules in the brain of the murderer,—and love and all the rest of the passions to a little passing heat of the blood. All disposed of quite quietly! Yet suicides are on the increase,—so are murders; and love and revenge and hatred and jealousy run on in their old predestined human course, caring nothing for the names we give them, and making as much havoc as ever they did in the days of Cæsar Borgia. To modern casuists, however, Pauline would but seem

"temporarily insane"—and during that fit of temporary insanity, she had drowned herself,—*voilà tout !*

Any way she was dead;—that was the chief thing I had to realize and to remember,—but with its usual obstinacy my brain refused to credit it! The mists rose slowly up from the river,—the church bells ceased ringing; a chill wind blew. I shuddered at the pure cold air—it seemed to freeze my blood. I looked abstractedly at the river, and my eyes lighted by chance on a long low flat building not far distant — the Morgue. Ah! Pauline,—if it were indeed she who had been "melodramatic" enough to drown—Pauline would be taken to the Morgue—and I should see her there. A little patience,—a day, perhaps two days,—and I should see her there!

Meanwhile, I was cold and tired and starved; I would go home,—home if I could walk there,—if my limbs were not too weak and stiff to support me. Oh, for a draught of Absinthe!—that would soon put fire into

my veins and warm the numbness of my heart! I paused a moment, still gazing at the dull water and the dull mists; then all at once a curious sick fear began to creep through me,—an awful premonition that something terrible was about to happen, though what it was I could not imagine. My heart began to beat heavily;—I kept my eyes riveted on the scene immediately opposite, for while the sensation I speak of mastered me, I dared not look behind. Presently I distinctly heard a low panting near me like the breathing of some heavy creature,—and my nervous dread grew stronger. For a moment I felt that I would rather fling myself into the Seine than turn my head! It was an absurd sensation,—a cowardly sensation; one that I knew I ought to control and subdue, and after a brief but painful contest with myself I gathered together a slight stock, not of actual courage but physical bravado,—and slowly, irresolutely looked back over my own shoulder,—then, unspeakably startled

and amazed at what I saw, I turned my whole body round involuntarily and confronted the formidable beast that lay crouched there on the Pont Neuf, watching me with its sly green eyes and apparently waiting on my movements. A leopard of the forest at large in the heart of Paris!—could anything be more strange and hideously terrifying? I stared at it,—it stared at me! I could almost count the brown velvet spots on its tawny hide,—I saw its lithe body quiver with the pulsations of its quick breath,—and for some minutes I was perfectly paralyzed with fear and horror;—afraid to stir an inch! Presently, as I stood inert and terror-stricken, I heard steps approaching, and a labourer appeared carrying some tin cans which clinked together merrily,—he whistled as he came along, and seemed to be in cheerful humour. I watched him anxiously. What would he do,—what would he say when he caught sight of that leopard lying on the bridge, obstructing his progress? Onward

he marched indifferently,—and my heart almost ceased to beat for a second as I saw him coming nearer and nearer to the horrible creature. . . . What!—was he blind?—Could he not see the danger before him? I strove to cry out,—but my tongue was like stiff leather in my mouth,—I could not utter a syllable;—and lo!—while my fascinated gaze still rested on him he had passed me!—passed apparently *over* or *through* the animal I saw and dreaded!

The truth flashed upon me in an instant,—I was the dupe of my own frenzy—and the leopard was nothing but a brain-phantasm! I laughed aloud, buttoned my coat close over me and drew myself erect,—as I did this, the leopard rose with slow and stealthy grace, and when I moved prepared to follow me. Again I looked at it—again it looked at me,—again I counted the spots on its sleek skin,—the thing was absolutely real and distinct to my vision,—was it possible that a diseased brain could produce such seemingly tangible shapes?

I began to walk rapidly,—and another peculiarity of my hallucination discovered itself,—namely, that *before* me as I looked I saw nothing but the usual surroundings of the streets and the passing people,—but *behind* me, I knew, I felt the horrible monster at my heels,—the monster created by my own poisoned thought,—a creature from whom there was no possible escape. The enemies of the body we can physically attack, and often physically repel,—but the enemies of the mind,—the frightful phantoms of a disordered imagination—these no medicine can cure, no subtle touch disperse!

And yet I could not quite accept the fact of the nervous havoc wrought upon me. I saw a boy carrying a parcel of '*Figaros*' to a neighbouring *kiosque*—and stopping him, I purchased one of his papers.

"Tell me," I then said, lightly and with a feigned indifference. "Do you see a—a great dog following me? I chanced upon a stray one on the Pont Neuf just now, but

I don't want it at my lodgings. Can you see it?"

The boy looked up and down and smiled.

"*Je ne vois rien, monsieur!*"

"*Merci!*" and nodding to him I strolled away, resolved not to look back again till I reached my own abode.

Once there, I turned round at the door. The leopard was within two inches of me. I kept a backward watch on it, as it followed me in, and up the stairs to my room. I shut the door violently in a frantic impulse of hope that I might thus shut it out,—of course that was useless,—and when I threw myself into a chair, it lay down on the floor opposite me. Then I realized that my case was one in which there could be no appeal, —it was no use fighting against *spectra*. The only thing to be done was to try and control the frenzy of fear that every now and then threatened to shake down all reason and coherency for ever, and make of me a mere howling maniac. I tried to

read,—but found I could not understand the printed page,—I found more distraction in thinking of Pauline and her death,—if indeed she were dead. Then, all unbidden, the memory of the fair and innocent Héloïse came across my mind. Should I go and tell her that I had had a strange dream in which it seemed as though I had frightened Pauline into drowning herself? No!—I would wait;—I would wait and watch the Morgue,—for till I saw her *there* I could not be sure she was dead. Anon, a fragment of that old Breton song Héloïse used to recite, repeated itself monotonously in my ears—

"Mon étoile est fatale,
Mon état est contre nature,
Je n'ai eu dans ce monde
Que des peines à endurer;
Nul chrétien sur la terre
Me veuille du bien!"

I hummed this over and over again to myself till I began to shed maudlin tears over my own wretched condition; I had brought myself to it,—but what of that?—

—the knowledge did not ameliorate matters. If you *know* you have done ill, say the moralists, you have gained the greatest possible advantage, because knowing your evil you can amend it. Very wise in theory no doubt!—but no use in practice. I could not eliminate the poisonous wormwood from my blood,—I was powerless to obliterate from my sight that repulsive spectral animal that lay before me in such seemingly substantial breathing guise. And so I wept weakly and foolishly as a driveling drunkard weeps over his emptied flagon,—and thought vaguely of all sorts of things. I even wondered whether, notwithstanding my having gone so far, there might not yet be a remedy for me—why not?—there was a Charcot in Paris—no man wiser,—no man kinder. But suppose I went to him, what would be the result. He would tell me to give up Absinthe. Give up Absinthe?—why then, I should give up my life!—I should die!—I should be taken away to that terrible unknown country whither I

had sent Silvion Guidèl,—where Pauline had followed him,—and I had no wish to go there ;—I might meet them, so I stupidly fancied, and it was too soon for such a meeting—yet! No!—I could not give up Absinthe,—my fairy with the green eyes, my love, my soul, my heart's core, the very centre and pivot of my being!—anything but that I would do gladly!—but not that, —never, never that! Pah!—how that leopard stared at me as I sat glowering and thinking, and pulling at the ends of my moustache, in a sort of dull stupor,—the stupor of mingled illness and starvation. For I had eaten nothing since the previous day, and though I was faint, it was not the faintness of natural hunger. That is another peculiarity of my favourite cordial,—taken in small doses it will provoke appetite,—but taken in large and frequent draughts, it invariably kills it. The thought of food attracted yet nauseated me, and so I remained huddled up in my chair engrossed in my own reflections, the nervous tears

still now and then trickling from my eyes and dropping like slow hot rain on my closely clenched hands.

The sound of a bugle-note startled me for a moment, and sent my thoughts flying off among fragmentary suggestions of national pride and military glory. France! France! —oh, fair and radiant France!—how canst thou smile on in the faces of such degenerate children as are clambering at thy knees to-day! Oh, France!—what glories were thine in old time!—what noble souls were born of thee!—what white flags of honour waved above thy glittering hosts!—what truth and chivalry beat in the hearts of thy sons, what purity and sweetness ruled the minds of thy daughters! The brilliancy of native wit, of inborn courtesy, of polished grace, were then the natural outcome of naturally fine feelings;—but now,—now!—what shall be said of thee O France, who hast suffered thyself to be despoiled by conquerors and art almost forgetting thy vows of vengeance! Paris, steeped in vice

and drowned in luxury, feeds her brain on such loathsome literature as might make even coarse-mouthed Rabelais and Swift recoil,—day after day, night after night, the absinthe-drinkers crowd the *cafés*, and swill the pernicious drug that of all accursed spirits ever brewed to make of man a beast, does most swiftly fly to the seat of reason to there attack and dethrone it;—and yet, the rulers do nothing to check the spreading evil,—the world looks on, purblind as ever and selfishly indifferent,—and the hateful cancer eats on into the breast of France, bringing death closer every day. France!—my France! degraded, lost, and cowardly as I am,—too degraded, too lost, too cowardly to even fight in the lowest ranks for thee,—there are moments when I am not blind to thy glories, when I am not wholly callous as to thy fate! I love thee France!—love thee with the foolish, powerless love that chained and beaten slaves may feel for their native land when exiled from it,—a love that cannot prove

its strength by any great or noble act,—that can do nothing,—nothing but look on and watch thee slipping like a loosened jewel out of the blazing tiara of proud nations,—and watching, know most surely that I, and such as I, have shaken thee from what thou wert, and what thou still shouldst be! "*Aux armes, citoyens!*" I cry stupidly, as my patriotic reverie breaks in my brain like a soap-bubble in air,—"*Formez vos bataillons!*"

Ah God!—I start from my chair, staggering to and fro, my head clasped between my hands;—I am dreaming again, like a fool!—dreaming,—and here I am, an *absintheur* in the City of Absinthe, and glory is neither for me, nor for thee, Paris, thou frivolous, lovely, godless, lascivious dominion of Sin! Godless!—and why not?—sinful!—and why not? God did not answer *us* when we prayed,—He was on the side of the Teutons! And we have found out that when we try to be good, life is hard and disagreeable; when we are wicked,

or what moralists consider wicked, then we find everything pleasant and easy. Some people find the reverse of this, or so they say,—well!—they are quite welcome to be virtuous if they choose. I tried to be virtuous once, and with me it failed to prove its advantages. I loved a woman honestly, and was betrayed; another man loved the same woman *dis*honestly and—kept her faith! This was God's doing (because everything is done by the will of God) therefore you see it was no use my striving to be honest! False arguments? specious reasoning?—not at all! I have the logic of an *absintheur! voilà tout!*

That leopard again!—By-and-bye I began to find a certain wretched amusement in watching the sunlight play on the smooth skin of this undesired spectral attendant, and I endeavoured to accept its presence with resignation. After a while I discovered that when I remained passive in one place for some time, the hallucination was brought forward in front of my eyes,—

whereas when I walked or was otherwise in rapid motion it was only to be seen behind me. Let scientists explain this if they can, by learned dissertations on the nerve-connections between the spine and brain-cells, the fact remains that the impression created upon me of the actual palpable presence of the animal was distinct and terribly real,—and though later on I found I could pass my hand through its seeming substance, *the conviction of its reality never left me.* Nor is there much chance of its ever leaving me,—it is with me now, and will probably continue to haunt me to my dying day. I walk through Paris apparently alone, but the huge, panting, stealthy thing is always close behind me,—my ears as well as my eyes testify to its presence,—I sit in *cafés* and it lies down in front of me, and we—the spectre and I—stare at each other for hours! People say I have a downward look,—sometimes they ask why I so often give a rapid glance behind me as though in fear or anxiety;—well!—it is because I

always have a vague hope that this phantasmal horror may go as suddenly as it came—but it never does—it never will! André Gessonex used to peer behind him in just the same fashion,—I remembered it now, and understood it. And I idly wondered what sort of creature the Absinthe-fairy had sent to him so persistently that he should have seen no way out of it but suicide. Now *I* had the courage of endurance,—or let us say, the cowardice; for I could not bear the thought of death,—it was the one thing that appalled me. For I so grasped the truth of the amazing fecundity of life everywhere, that I knew and felt death could not be a conclusion,—but only the silence and time needed for the embryo-working of another existence. And on that other existence I dared not ponder! Oh, if there is one thing I rate at in the Universe more than another, it is the uncertainty of Creation's meaning. Nature is a great mathematician, so the scientists declare —then why is the chief number in the calcu-

lation always missing? Why is it that no matter how we count and weigh and plan, we can never make up the sum total? There is surely a fault somewhere in the design,—and perchance the great unseen, silent, indifferent Force we call God, has, in a dull moment, propounded a vast Problem to which He Himself may have forgotten the Answer!

IX.

During the next two days I lived for the Morgue, and the Morgue only. I could not believe Pauline was dead till I saw her there,—there on the wet cold marble where her lover had lain before her! I haunted the place,—I skulked about it at all hours like a thief meditating plunder. And at last my patience was rewarded. An afternoon came when I saw the stretcher carried in from the river's bank with more than usual pity and reverence,—and I, pressing in with the rest of the morbid spectators, saw the fair, soft, white body of the woman I had loved and hated and maddened and driven to her death, laid out on the dull hard slab of stone like a beautiful figure of frozen snow. The river had used her ten-

derly—poor little Pauline!—it had caressed her gently and had not disfigured her delicate limbs or spoilt her pretty face,—she looked so wise, so sweet and calm, that I fancied the cold and muddy Seine must have warmed and brightened to the touch of her drowned beauty!

Yes!—the river had fondled her!—had stroked her cheeks and left them pale and pure,—had kissed her lips and closed them in a childlike happy smile,—had swept all her dark hair back from the smooth white brow just to show how prettily the blue veins were pencilled under the soft transparent skin,—had closed the gentle eyes and deftly pointed the long dark lashes in a downward sleepy fringe—and had made of one little dead girl so wondrous and piteous a picture, that otherwise hard-hearted women sobbed at sight of it, and strong men turned away with hushed footsteps and moistened eyes. The very officials at the Morgue were reverent,—they stood apart and looked on solemnly,—one of them

raised the tiny white hand and examined a ring on the finger, a small enamelled forget-me-not in gold, and seemed about to draw it off, but on second thoughts left it where it was. *I* knew that ring well,—Héloïse had given it to her—it was a trinket for which she had always had a sentimental fondness such as girls often indulge in for perfectly worthless souvenirs. I stared and stared,—I gloated on every detail of that delicate, half-nude form,—and my brain was steady enough to remind me that now—now it was my duty to identify the poor little corpse without a moment's delay, so that it might be borne reverently to the care of the widowed Comtesse de Charmilles and Héloïse St. Cyr. Then it would receive proper and honourable interment,—and Pauline, like Shakespeare's Ophelia, would have

> "Her maiden strewments, and the bringing home
> Of bell and burial."

But no!—I put away the suggestion as soon as it occurred to me. I took a peculiar

delight in thinking that if her body were not identified within the proper interval, she too, like her lover, Silvion Guidèl, would be cast into the general ditch of death, without a name, without a right to memory! My deformed and warped intelligence found a vivid pleasure in the contemplation of such petty and unnecessary cruelty,—it seemed good to me to wreak spite upon the dead,—and as I have already told you, the brain of a confirmed *absintheur* accepts the most fiendish ideas as both beautiful and just. If you doubt what I say, make inquiries at any of the large lunatic asylums in France,—ask to be told some of the aberrations of absinthe-maniacs, who form the largest percentage of brains gone incurably wrong,—and you will hear enough to form material for a hundred worse histories than mine! What can you expect from a man, who has poisoned his blood and killed his conscience? You may talk of the Soul as you will—but the Soul can only make itself manifest in this life through the

Senses,—and if the Senses are diseased and perverted, how can the messages of the spirit be otherwise than diseased and perverted also ?

And so, yielding to the devilish humours working within me, I held my peace and gave no sign as to the identity of Pauline ; —but I went to the Morgue so frequently, nearly every hour in fact, and stared so long and persistently at her dead body that my conduct at last attracted some attention from the authorities in charge. One evening, the third, I think, after she had been laid there, an official tapped me on the arm.

"*Pardon !* Monsieur seems to know the corpse ?"

I looked at him angrily, and though there were a few people standing about us, I gave him the lie direct.

"You mistake. I know nothing !"

He eyed me with suspicion and disfavour.

"You seem to take a strange interest in the sight of the poor creature, all the same!"

"Well, what of that ?" I retorted. "The

girl, though dead, is beautiful! I am an artist!—I have the soul of a poet!" and I laughed ironically. "I love beauty—and I study it wherever I find it, dead or living,—is that so strange?"

"But certainly no, not at all!" said the official, shrugging his shoulders and still looking at me askance. "Only there is just this one little thing that I would say. If we could obtain any idea, however slight,—any small clue which we might follow up as to the proper identification of this so unfortunate *demoiselle*, we should be glad. She was a lady of gentle birth and breeding—we have no doubt of that,—but the linen she wore was unmarked,—we can find no name anywhere except one contained in a locket she wore——"

My nerves shook, and I controlled myself with difficulty.

"What sort of locket?" I asked.

"Oh, a mere trifle,—of no value whatever. We opened it, of course,—it had nothing inside but a withered rose leaf and a small

slip of paper, on which was written one word, '*Silvion.*' That may be the name of a place or a person—we do not know. It does not help us."

No!—it did not help them—but it helped *me!*—helped me to keep my puny rage more firmly fixed upon that helpless, smiling, waxen-looking thing that lay before me in such solemn and chilly fairness. A withered rose leaf, and the name of that accursed priest!—these were her sole treasures, were they?—all she cared to save from the wreckage of her brief summer time! Well, well! women are strange fools at best and the wisest man that ever lived cannot unravel the mystery of their complex mechanism. Half puppets, half angels!—and one never knows to which side of their natures to appeal!

"We have given a very precise and particular description of the corpse in our *annonces*"—went on the official meditatively—"but at present it has led to nothing. We should be really glad of

identification,—though it is only a question of sentiment——"

"A question of sentiment! What do you mean?" I asked roughly.

He gave a deprecatory gesture.

"Monsieur, we Frenchmen have hearts! *La pauvre petite* there is too delicate and pretty to lie in the common *fosse!*"

Good God! What an absurd influence the loveliness of a woman can exert on the weak minds of men! Here was a girl dead and incapable of knowing whether she was lying in the common *fosse* or any other place of interment, and yet this stern officer of the Morgue, touched by her looks, regretted the necessity of burying her thus harshly and without reverence.

I laughed carelessly.

"You are very gallant, Monsieur! I wish I could assist you! This girl-suicide is beautiful as you say,—I have contemplated her face and figure with much pleasure——"

"Will you look at her more closely,

Monsieur?" he asked, suddenly turning a keen glance upon me.

I perceived his drift. He suspected me of knowing something, and wanted to startle me into confessing it! Cunning rogue!—But I was a match for him!

"I shall be charmed to do so!" I responded with easy indifference. "It will be a privilege!—a lesson in art!"

He said nothing, but simply led the way within. One minute more, and the electric light flashed in a dazzling white effulgence over the drowned girl,—I felt the official's eyes upon me, and I kept firm. But in very truth I was sick—sick at heart!—and a chill crept through all my blood,—for I was near enough to touch the woman I had so loved!—I could have kissed her!—her little white stiff hand lay within a few inches of mine! I breathed with difficulty,—do what I would, I could not prevent a slight shiver visibly shaking my limbs. And she!—she was like a little marble goddess asleep—poor little Pauline!

Then—all suddenly—the official bent over her corpse and raised it up forcibly by the head and shoulders, . . . I thought I should have shrieked aloud!

"Do not touch her!" I exclaimed in a hoarse whisper. "It is a—sacrilege!"

He looked at me steadily, quite unmoved by my words.

"You are sure you cannot identify the body?—you have no idea who she was when living?" he demanded, in measured accents.

I shrank backward. As he held the dead girl in that upright attitude I was afraid she might open her eyes!

"I tell you, no!" I answered with a sort of sullen ferocity. "No, no, *no!* Lay her down! Why the devil can you not let her be?"

He gave me another searching, distrustful look. Then he slowly and with a certain tenderness laid the body back in its former recumbent position, and beckoned me to follow him out of the mortuary. I did so.

"*Voyons*, Monsieur"—he said confidentially—"this is not a case of murder,—there is no ground for any suspicion of that kind. It is simply a suicide,—we have many such,—and surely from your manner and words, you could, if you choose, give us some information. Why not speak frankly? *Par exemple*, will you *swear* that you know absolutely nothing of the woman's identity?"

Persistent fool! I returned his glance defiantly,—we were in the outer chamber now, and the glass screen was once more between us and the corpse, so I felt more at ease.

"Why, oaths are not of much value nowadays in France!" I answered carelessly. "Our teachers have left us no God, so what am I to swear by? By your head or my own?"

He was patient, this man of the Morgue, and though I spoke loudly, and there were people standing about, he took no offence at my levity.

"Swear by your honour, Monsieur!—that is enough."

My honour! Ha!—that was excellent!—I, who had no more sense of honour than a carrion crow!

"By my honour, then!" I said, laughing—"I swear I know nothing of your pretty dead Magdalen in there! A *fille de joie*, no doubt! Strange that so many men have pity for such; even the amiable Christ had a good word to say on behalf of these naughty ones! What was it?—Yes—I remember;—'*Her sins, which are many, are forgiven her, for she loved much!*' True!—love excuses many follies. And she,—the little drowned one,—is charming!—I admire her with all my heart!—but I cannot tell you who she is, or—to speak more correctly—who she was!"

As I uttered the deliberate lie, a sort of electric shock ran through me—my heart leaped violently and the blood rushed to my brows,—a pair of steadfast, sorrowful, lustrous eyes flashed wondering reproach at

me over the heads of the little throng of spectators,—they were the eyes of Héloïse St. Cyr!

Yes!—it was she!—she had kept her word!—she had come to rescue Pauline,—to defraud me of my vengeance on the dead! Stately, angelic, pitiful, and pure, she stood in that cold and narrow chamber, her face pale as the face of her drowned cousin,—her hands tremblingly outstretched! As in a dream I saw the press of people make way for her,—I saw men take off their hats and remain uncovered as though a prayer were being spoken,—I saw the official in charge approach her and murmur some respectful inquiry,—and then—then I heard her voice, sweet though shaken with tears,—a voice that sent its penetrating music straight to the very core of my wretched and worthless being!

"I come to claim her!" she said simply, addressing herself to the official. "She is my cousin, Pauline de Charmilles,—only daughter of the late Count de Charmilles.

We have lost her—long!"—and a half sob escaped her lips—"Give her to me now,—and I will take her—oh, poor Pauline!—I will take her . . . home!"

Her strength gave way—she hid her face in her hands—and some women near her began crying for sympathy. It was what cynical people would call a "scene"—and yet—somehow, I could not mock at it as I would fain have done. The spirit of Humanity was here—even here among the morbid frequenters of the Morgue,—the "touch of nature which makes the whole world kin" was not lacking anywhere—save in me!—and more than all, Héloïse was here,—and in her presence one could not jest. One believed in God;—one always believes in God, by the side of a good woman!

I raised my eyes,—I was resolved to look at her straight,—and I did so—but only for one second! For her glance swept over me with such unutterable horror, loathing, and agony, that I cowered

like a slave under the lash! I crept out of her sight!—I slunk away, followed by the phantom beast of my own hideous degradation,—away—away—out into the chill darkness of the winter night, defeated! Defeated!—defrauded of the last drop in my delirious draught of hatred!—Alone under the cold and starless sky, I heaped wild curses on myself, on God,—on the world!—on life and time and space!—while she—the angel Héloïse, whose love I had once possessed unknowingly, bore home her sacred dead,—home to a maiden funeral-couch of flowers, sanctified by tears and hallowed by prayers,—home,—to receive the last solemn honours due to Innocence and—Frailty!

X.

What was there to do now? Nothing,—but to drink Absinthe! With the death of Pauline every other definite object in living had ended. I cared for nobody;—while as far as my former place in society was concerned I had apparently left no blank. You cannot imagine what little account the world takes of a man when he ceases to set any value on himself. He might as well never have been born,—or he might be dead,—he is as equally forgotten, and as utterly dismissed.

I attended Pauline's funeral of course. I found out when it was to take place,—and I watched it from a distance. It was a pretty scene,—a sort of white, fairy

burial. For we had a fall of snow in Paris that day,—and the small coffin was covered with a white pall, and all the flowers upon it were white;—and when the big vault was unbarred to admit this dainty burden of death hidden in blossoms, its damp and gloomy walls were all covered with wreaths and garlands, as though it were a bridal chamber. This was the work of Héloïse, no doubt!—sweet saint Héloïse! She looked pale as a ghost and thin as a shadow that afternoon;—she walked by the side of the widowed Comtesse de Charmilles, who appeared very feeble of tread, and was draped in black from head to foot. I gazed at the solemn cortége from an obscure corner in the cemetery,—and smiled as I thought that I—I only had wrought all the misery on this once proud and now broken-down, bereaved family!—I, and—Absinthe! *If* I had remained the same Gaston Beauvais that I once had been,—if on the night Pauline had made her wild confession of shame to me, I had

listened to the voice of mercy in my heart, —if I had never met André Gessonex . . . imagine!—so much hangs on an "if"! Now and then a kind of remorse stung me, —but it was a mere passing emotion,—and it only troubled me when I thought of or saw Héloïse. She was, as she now is, the one reproach of my life,—the only glimpse of God I have ever known! When Pauline was laid to rest,—when the iron grating of the cold tomb shut grimly down on all that was mortal of the bright foolish child I had first met fresh from her school at Vevey,—this same sweet, pale Héloïse lost all her self-control for a moment, and with a long sobbing cry fell forward in a swoon among the little frightened attendant acolytes and their flaring candles,—but she recovered speedily. And when she could once more stand upright, she tottered to the door of the mausoleum, and kissed it,—and hung a wreath of white roses upon it, on which the word "Amour!" was written in silver letters. Then she went

away weeping, with all the rest of the funeral train—but I—I remained behind! Hidden among the trees I lay quiet, in undiscovered safety, so that when the night came I was still there. The guardians of Père-la-Chaise, patrolled the place as usual and locked the gates—but I was left a prisoner within, which was precisely what I desired. Once alone—all all alone in the darkness of the night, I flung up my arms in delirious ecstacy—this City of the Dead was mine for the time!—mine, all these moulding corpses in the clay! I was sole ruler of this wide domain of graves! I rushed to the shut-up marble prison of Pauline—I threw myself on the ground before it,—I wept and raved and swore, and called her by every endearing name I could think of!—the awful silence maddened me! I beat at the iron grating with my fists till they bled;—"Pauline!" I cried—"Pauline!" No answer!—oh God! —she would never answer any call again! Grovelling in the dust I looked up despair-

ingly—the word "Amour!" with its silvery glisten on Héloïse's rose-garland, flashed on my eyes like a flame. "Amour!" Love! God or the Devil! It is one or the other; it is the thing that rules the universe,—it is the only Deity we can never abjure! Love!—oh madness! Tell me, women and men, tell me whether love rules your lives most for good, or most for evil? Can we not get at the truth of this? If we can, then we shall know the secret of life's riddle. For if Love lead us most to evil, then the hidden Force of Creation is a Fiend,—if it lead us most to good, then—then we have a God to deal with! And I fear me much it is a God after all!—I shudder to think it,—but I am afraid—afraid! For if God exists, then they—all the dead creatures I know, whose spirits haunt me,—they are happy, wise, victorious and immortal,—while I—I am lower than the veriest insect that breeds in the mould and is blind to the sun!

I must not dwell on this;—I must not

look back to those hours passed outside Pauline's tomb. For they were horrible! Once, as the night waned, I saw Silvion Guidèl,—he leaned against the pillars of the vault and barred my way with one uplifted hand. I could not fight him—a creature of the mist and air!—but his face was as the face of an angel, and its serene triumph filled me with impotent fury! He had won the day, I felt!—Pauline was his—not mine! God had been on his side, and Death, instead of conquering him, had given him the victory!

One day, weeks after Pauline's burial, I was very ill. I could not move at all—the power of my limbs was gone. Such a strange weakness and sick fever beset me that I did nothing but weep for sheer helplessness. It was a sort of temporary paralysis—it passed away after a while, but it left me terrified and unstrung. When I got better, a droll idea entered my brain. I would go to confession! I, who hated priests, would see what they could tell me

for once,—I would find out whether Religion, or what was called religion, had any mystical saving grace for an *absintheur!* I was abjectly miserable at the time,—a fit of the most intolerable depression had laid hold upon me. Moreover, I had been foolishly hurt by chancing to see my father walking along with his new partner,—the man he had adopted in my place,—a fine, handsome, pleasant, dashing-looking fellow, —and he,—my father,—had seemed perfectly happy!—Yes, perfectly happy! He had not seen me,—probably he would not have known me if he had,—he leaned upon the arm of his new "son"—and laughed with him at some jest or other;—he had forgotten me!—or if he had not actually forgotten, he was determined to appear as though he had. I thought him cruel,—callous;—I blamed fate, and everything and everybody except myself who had wrought my own undoing. That is the way with many of us,—we get wilfully and deliberately into mischief,—then we

look about to see on which one of our fellow-creatures we can lay the fault!

"Open confession is good for the soul!" says some moralist or other. I determined to try it—for a change! And my confessor should be good old Père Vaudron!—I wondered I had never thought of him before. He might perhaps be some comfort to me,—for he was an honest Christian, and therefore he would not be likely to turn away from any penitent, however fallen and degraded.

But was I penitent? Of course not! I was miserable I tell you;—and I wanted the relief of unburdening myself to some one who would not repeat what I said. I was not sorry for anything—I was only tired, and made nervous by the spectral beast that followed me, as well as by other curious and frightful hallucinations. Fiery wheels in the air,—great, glittering birds of prey swooping down with talons outstretched to clutch at me,—whirlpools of green in the ground into which it seemed

I must fall headlong as I walked—these were common delusions;—but I began to dread madness as I had never dreaded it before,—and the more I considered the matter, the more determined I became to speak to Père Vaudron, who had known me from boyhood;—it might do me good,—there were miracles in the Church,—who could tell!

And so one evening I made my way up to the little well-remembered chapel,—the place where, if all had gone smoothly, I should have been married to Pauline,—the altar where "le beau Silvion" had "assisted" his too-confiding uncle at early mass. Everything was very quiet,—there were flowers about,—and the sacred lamps of vigil were burning clearly. A woman was sweeping out the chancel,—I recognized her at once,—it was old Margot. She did not know me; she looked up as I entered, but finding (no doubt) my appearance the reverse of prepossessing, she resumed her task with increased vigour.

Save for her and myself, the church was empty. After waiting a little I went up and spoke to her.

"Does M. the *Curé* hear confessions this evening?"

She stared at me and crossed herself,—then pointed to the sacristy bell.

"*Sonnez, s'il vous plaît!*"

She was always curt and cross, this old Margot!—I tried her again.

"It is not the usual hour, perhaps?"

She made no reply;—so, smiling a little at her acerbity I did as she bade me and rang the bell she indicated. A small boy appeared,—an acolyte.

"Does the reverend father attend the confessional this evening?"

"Yes. He will be in the church almost immediately."

I retired and sat down to wait. I was beginning to feel very much amused. This was the finest jest I had ever played with myself,—I was actually pretending to have a conscience! Meanwhile old Margot took

her departure with her broom and all her cleansing paraphernalia—and left me alone in the church. She banged the big door behind her noisily,—and the deep silence that followed its hollow reverberation oppressed me uncomfortably. There was a large crucifix near me, and the figure of Christ upon it looked tortured and gruesome; what a foolish fond enthusiast He was, I thought, to perish for such a delusive idea as the higher spiritualization of Man! We shall never become spiritual; we are of the earth earthy—our desires are base,—our passions contemptible; but as we have been created so we shall remain, *selon moi*;—others may hold a different opinion if they choose.

A slow step sounded on the marble floor, and I hastily bent my head as penitents do, looking between my clasped fingers at good old Vaudron as he came through the sacristy and paced gently towards the confessional. Heavens! how changed he was!—how he stooped!—and his hair was snow-white,—his face too, once so florid and merry, was

wrinkled, careworn, and pale. He had suffered, even he, this poor old man,—and his suffering was also my work! God! what a fiendish power one human being has to ruin many others! I waited till he was seated in the usual niche—then I made my way to the penitent's corner. As I knelt I heard him mutter the usual Latin formula, —he deemed me also at my prayers, but I said nothing. I kept silence so long, that at last he sighed impatiently, and putting his lips close to the curtained grating said mildly—

"I am waiting, my son! Take courage!"

My sense of amusement increased. I could have laughed aloud, it was such a comedy.

"*Mon père,*" I murmured, controlling myself by an effort, "my confession will be strange and terrible,—are you prepared for something quite unusual?"

I felt that he was startled,—but in his quiet accents there was only just the faintest touch of sternness as he replied—

"I am prepared. Commend yourself to God—to Him you speak as well as to me,—therefore be truthful and conceal nothing, as only by true confession can you hope for mercy!"

"The jargon of the Church as usual!" I said contemptuously. "Spare me unnecessary platitudes, good father! My sins are not those of every day,—and everyday comfort will not do for me. And so to begin at once,—*I have murdered a man!* This and no less is my crime!—can you give me absolution?"

I heard a sudden agitated movement inside the confessional. Through the small holes of the grating I could see him clasp his hands as though in terror or prayer. Then he spoke.

"Absolution? Wretched soul, there is none—none! Unless you at once confess yourself to the authorities and give yourself up to justice, there is no forgiveness either in earth or heaven for such an evil deed. Who was the man?"

"My enemy!"

"You should have pardoned him!"

"Good father, you are not consistent! According to your own account, God Himself does not pardon till justice is done. I —like Deity—wanted justice! I killed a deceiver, a liar, a seducer,—a priest who robbed me of the woman I loved!"

A shuddering sigh—half a groan escaped him.

"A priest!—oh God!"

"Yes, a priest!" I went on recklessly. "What then? Priests are worse than laymen. Their vocation deprives them of love, —they crave for it because it is forbidden; they will have it at all risks. And he, the man I killed—had it,—he won it by a mere look, a mere smile; he had fine eyes and a graceful trick of manner. He was happy for a time at any rate. He was as beautiful as an angel—as gifted as a Marcus Aurelius! —Did you never know any one like him? He had the best of all the world could give him in the love of a woman as fair as the

morning. She is dead too now. She drowned herself as soon as she knew he was gone—and that I had killed him! So he keeps her love to the end you see,—and I am baffled of it all. That is why I have come to you—just because I am baffled, —I want you to comfort me—I want a victory somewhere! I want you to tell me that the man I murdered is damned to all eternity, because he had no time to repent of his sins before he died! I want you to tell me that she—the woman,—is damned also, because, she killed herself without God's permission! Tell me any lies the Church will allow you to tell! Tell me that I am safe because I endure!—because though loaded with sin and vice, I still *live on*, waiting for God to kill me rather than myself! Tell me this and I will read all the Penitential Psalms in the *café* this evening instead of the '*Petit Journal!*'" I paused for lack of breath,—I could see Vaudron start up from his seat in horror as I uttered my reckless tirade—

and now, when I gave him time to speak, his voice trembled with righteous indignation.

"Blasphemer, be silent!" he said—"Wretched, unhappy man!—how dare you presume to enter God's house in such a condition? You are mad or drunk!—you affront the Sacrament of Confession by ribald language!—you insult the Church! Pray for true contrition if you can pray—and go!—I will hear no more!"

"But you *shall* hear!" I said wildly. "You *must* hear! I have murdered a man, I tell you!—and the accursëd memory of his dying eyes, his dying face, clings to me like a disease in the air! You do not ask me who he was—yet you know him!—you loved him! He was your nephew—Silvion Guidèl!"

Hardly had the words left my lips when the confessional doors flew open, and Vaudron rushed upon me,—he clutched me by the arm, his fine old face burning with wrath.

"You murdered him!—you—you!" he gasped, his eyes glittering, his hand uplifted as though he would have struck me down before him.

I smiled.

"Even so, good father! I,—simply I! And here I am,—at your mercy—only remember this,—what I have said to you is *under the seal of confession!*"

His upraised arm dropped nerveless at his side—he stared fixedly at me, his breath coming and going rapidly as though he had been running a race. Then, still holding me in a fast grip, he dragged me to the front of the altar where the light shed by the swinging lamps could fall directly upon my features. There, like one in some feverish dream, he scanned me up and down, doubtfully at first, then with gradually dawning, horrified recognition.

"God have mercy upon me!" he ejaculated tremulously; "It is Gaston Beauvais!"

"Precisely so, *mon cher* Vaudron!" I replied composedly. "It is Gaston Beau-

vais! It is the Gaston Beauvais who was duped and betrayed,—and who has avenged his wrong in the good old Biblical fashion, by killing his betrayer! More than this—it is the Gaston Beauvais who drove Pauline de Charmilles to her self-sought death, by telling her the fate of her lover,—what could you expect!—she was a silly girl always! And now I unburden myself to you that you may know me; and that I also may know if there is any truth in the religion you profess. I think not,—for you, an ordained servant of the Church, have already shown something of unseemly violence! Your grip on my arm is not of the lightest, I assure you!—you have given way to anger,—fie, *père* Vaudron! Wrath in the sanctuary is not becoming to your order! What!—did you fancy you were a man for once,—instead of a priest?"

I did not mean to offer him this insult,—the bitter jest escaped my lips before I was aware of it. But it made no visible effect on him,—he merely loosened his hold of me

and stood a step or two apart, looking at me with strained anguished eyes.

"You can break your vows, if you like," I went on carelessly. "Vows of every kind are brittle ware nowadays. You can tell my father I am a murderer,—the murderer of Silvion Guidèl—and so give him fresh cause to congratulate his foresight in having disowned me,—you can tell Héloïse St. Cyr that I goaded her cousin to madness,—you can betray me to the guillotine. All this is in your power, and by doing it you will only prove, like many another of your craft, how lightly a Creed weighs in the balance against personal passion, . . . you will be wise in your generation like the Pharisees of old——"

"Stop—stop!" he cried hoarsely, flinging up his hands and clasping them above his head. "I cannot bear it—oh God! I cannot bear it! Wretched man, what have *I* done to you that you should so torture me!"

I was silent. What had he done? Why —nothing! I watched him coldly,—his

countenance was a strange study! He was fighting a mental battle,—a conflict of sworn duty against all the claims and instincts of manhood,—it seemed surprising to me that he should deem it worth his while to engage in such a struggle. A few minutes passed thus,—no one entered the church,—we were alone with all the familiar things of religion about us, the lamps above us shedding a blood-like hue on the figure of the Christ crucified. Presently, as though drawn by some compelling instinct he turned towards this Image of his Faith,—a great sigh broke from his lips,—and, tottering feebly forward, he fell upon his knees and hid his face,—I saw tears trickling slowly between his wrinkled fingers. Foolish old man! His simplicity vexed me—he looked like the picture of a praying apostle, with the faint glow from the light above the cross falling in the shape of a halo round his silvery hair!

And I—I stood irresolute,—half abashed, wholly embarrassed,—inclined to laugh or

weep, I knew not which ;—when all at once a horrible sensation overwhelmed me,—something snapt asunder in my temples like a suddenly cut wire,—the whole nave of the church grew black as pitch, and I threw out my hands to keep myself from falling. Then came masses of pale green vapour that twisted and twirled, and sent shafts of lambent fire, or lightning as it seemed into the very centre of my brain !—but through it all, though I seemed caught up and devoured by flame, I saw Vaudron's devout figure kneeling at the crucifix ; and I rushed to it as to some certain rescue.

"Save me!" I cried desperately. "Have you no pity?" and I clutched at his garment. "Do you not see?—I am going mad!—mad!"

And I burst into a peal of delirious laughter that woke loud echoes from the vaulted roof and startled my own ears with a sense of horror. But with that laughter, the paroxysm passed,—my brain cleared, and I regained my self-control as by an

electric shock that only left my limbs trembling. Père Vaudron meanwhile had risen from his knees and now confronted me, his features pallid with woe and wonder.

"Pardon me!" I said, and forced a smile. "I am not well! I have nervous delusions,—I suffer from too much dissipation—I am a victim to pleasure! Self-indulgence is an agreeable thing,—but it has its consequences which are *not* always agreeable. It is nothing—a mere passing ailment! But now, good father,—as you have said your prayers—(and I hope gained much benefit thereby!) may I ask if you have no word for me? It is the duty of a priest, I believe, if he cannot give absolution, to at least enjoin penance!"

He met my satirical glance with a stern sorrow in his own eyes—the tears were still wet on his cheeks.

"The secret of your crime is safe with me!" was all he said,—and turned away.

I hastened after him.

"Is that all?" I asked, half banteringly.

He stopped, and looked fixedly at me

once more ;—the agony depicted in his face would have touched me had my heart not been harder than adamant.

"All!" he exclaimed passionately. "Is it not the 'all' you need? You tell me you murdered the unhappy Silvion,—you,—Gaston Beauvais, of all men in the world!—and why have you told me? Simply to weigh me down to the grave with the awful burden of that hidden knowledge! You have no regret or remorse,—you speak of what you have done with the most horrible cynicism,—and to talk of penance to you would be to outrage its very name! For God's sake leave me!—leave me to the wretchedness of my lonely old age,—leave me, while I have strength to let you go unharmed — I am but human! — your presence sickens me—I have no force to bear —more——"

His voice failed him,—he made a slight gesture of dismissal.

"And I—do you not think *I* am miserable?" I said angrily. "What a set of

egotists you are—you and my father, and the whole *baraque!* Fine Christians truly! —always pitying yourselves! Have you no pity for Me?"

The old *curé* drew himself up, the dignity and pathos of his grief making his homely figure for the moment majestic.

"I pity you, God knows!" he said solemnly. "I pity you more than the lowest pitiable thing that breathes! A man with the curse of Cain upon his soul,—a man without a heart, without a conscience, without peace in this world or hope in the next; —as Christ lives, I pity you! But do not expect more of me than pity! I am a poor frail old man,—lacking in all the virtues of the saints—and I cannot—Heaven help me! I cannot forgive you!"—and his voice shook as, waving me back with one hand he walked feebly to the door of the sacristy— "I cannot!—Christ have mercy upon me!— I cannot! I have no strength for that,— the poor child Pauline—the wretched Silvion!—no, no! I cannot forgive!—not

yet! God must teach me to do that—God must help me,—of my own accord I cannot!"

On a sudden impulse I flung myself on my knees before him.

"Père Vaudron!" I cried. "Remember!—You knew me as a child—you loved me as a boy,—you are my father's friend! Think—I am a wreck—a lost soul!—will you let me go without a word of comfort?"

He stood inert—his face pale as death, his lips quivering. The struggle within him was very bitter—his breath came hard and fast,—he too had loved that accursedly beautiful Silvion! After a pause, he raised his shaking hand and pointed to the crucifix.

"There—*there!*" he muttered brokenly—"Go there—and—pray! As a man I dare say nothing to you—as a priest I say, God help you!"

Poor old man! His Christian heroism was sorely tried! He drew his garment from my touch,—the sacristy-door opened and shut,—he was gone.

I sprang to my feet and looked about

me. I was alone in the church,—alone and face to face with the crucifix,—the great, gaunt, bleeding Figure with the down-dropped Head and thorny Crown. "Go there—and pray!" What—I?—I, an *absintheur?* Kneel at a crucifix?—Never? It could do *me* no good, I knew,—whatever miracle it might work on others!

Poor old Vaudron! I had made him miserable—poor, simple, silly, feeble soul! "God help you!" he had said—not "God pardon you!" He knew the Eternal Code of Justice better than to use the word "pardon." I should scarcely have thought he had so much firmness in him—so much stanch manhood. It was not in human nature to easily forgive such a criminal as I,—and he, in spite of his vocation, had been true to human nature. I honoured him for it. Human Nature is a grand thing! Sometimes noble, sometimes mean,—sometimes dignified, sometimes abject,—what an amazing phase of Creation it is!—and though so human, how full (at odd intervals) of

the Divine! The crucifix is its Symbol,—for Man at his best is an Ideal,—and when he reaches this point of perfection, the rest of his race hang him up on a cross like a criminal in the sight of the centuries, to mock at, to worship now and then, and to sneer at still more frequently; for, says the world—"Look at this fool! He professed to be able to live a nobler life than we, and see where we have nailed him!"

And I passed the dead Christ with an indifferent shrug and smile as I stumbled out of the quiet church into the chill air of the night, and thought how little the Christian creed had done for me. It had (perhaps) persuaded Vaudron to "pity" me, and to say, "God help" me,—but what cared I for pity or a vaguely divine assistance? I had better material wherewith to deal!—and, humming the fragment of a tune, I sauntered drowsily down to the Boulevards, and there, as a suitable wind-up to my "religious" evening, got dead drunk,—on Absinthe!

XI.

The time that immediately followed that night is a blur to me ;—I have no recollection at all of anything that happened. For I was very ill. During the space of a whole month I lay in my bed, a prey to violent fever and delirium. So I was told afterwards ;—I knew nothing. The people at my lodgings got alarmed and sent for a doctor,—he was a good fellow in his way, and took an amiably scientific interest in me. When I recovered my senses he told me what I knew very well before,—namely that all my sufferings were due to excessive indulgence in Absinthe.

"You must give it up," he said decisively, "at once,—and for ever. It is a detestable habit,—a horrible craze of the

Parisians, who are positively deteriorating in blood and brain by reason of their passion for this poison. What the next generation will be, I dread to think! I know it is a difficult business to break off anything to which the system has grown accustomed,—but you are still a young man, and you cannot be too strongly warned against the danger of continuing in your present course of life. Moral force is necessary,—and you must exert it. I have a large medical practice, and cases like yours are alarmingly common, and as much on the increase as morphinomania amongst women,—but I tell you frankly no medicine can do good, where the patient refuses to employ his own power of resistance. I must ask you therefore, for your own sake, to bring all your will to bear on the effort to overcome this fatal habit of yours, as a matter of duty and conscience."

Duty and conscience! I smiled,—and, turning on my pillows, stared at him curiously. He was a quiet, self-possessed

man of middle age, rather good-looking, with a calm voice and a reserved manner.

"Duty and conscience!" I murmured languidly. "How well they sound—those good little words! And so, doctor, you consider me in a bad condition?"

He surveyed me with a cold, professional air.

"I certainly do," he answered. "If it were not for the fact that you have the recuperative forces of youth in you, I should be inclined to pronounce you as incurable. Were I to analyze your state——"

"Do so, I beg of you!" I interrupted him eagerly. "Analyze me by all means!—I am fond of science!"

He looked at me dubiously and felt my pulse, watch in hand.

"Science is in its infancy," he said meditatively, "especially medical science. But some few facts it has entirely mastered. And so, speaking without any reserve, I must inform you that if you persist in drinking *absinthe* you will become a hope-

less maniac. Your illness has been a sort of God-send,—it has forced you to live a month under my care without tasting a drop of that infernal liquid. And a certain benefit has been the result, so that, in a way, you are prepared to be cured. But your brain-cells are still heavily charged with the poison, and a violent irritation has been set up in the nerve-tissues. Your blood is contaminated—and its flow from the heart to the brain is irregular,—sometimes violently interrupted;—a state of things which naturally produces giddiness, swooning, and fits of delirium which resemble strong epilepsy. Such a condition might make you subject to hallucinations of an unpleasant kind——"

"Just so!" I interposed lazily. "And with all your skill, doctor, you have not got rid of that brute down there!"

He started,—and gazed inquiringly in the direction to which I pointed, where plain and tangible to my eyes, the tawny spectral leopard lay *on* my bed, not below

it,—its great yellow forepaws resting close to my feet.

"What brute?" he demanded, bringing his calm glance to bear upon me once more, and again pressing his cool, firm fingers on my throbbing pulse.

I explained in a few words, the hateful delusion that had troubled me so long. His brows knitted, and he seemed perplexed.

"No cure for me?" I asked indifferently, noting the expression of his face.

"I do not know—I cannot tell," he answered hurriedly. "Such persistently marked *spectra* is generally the symptom of existing disease,—I had hoped otherwise—but——"

"You had hoped it was merely temporary," I said. "Ah, I understand! But if disease has actually begun, what is the remedy?"

He hesitated.

"Come—speak!" And I raised myself on my pillows impatiently. "You need not be afraid to give an opinion!"

"There is no remedy," he replied reluctantly. "Disease of the brain is incurable,—it can only be retarded. Care, good food, quiet, and total abstinence from any sort of spirituous poison,—this *régime*, can avert, and probably check any fresh symptoms,—in some cases a normal condition can be attained which very nearly approaches complete cure. More than this would be impossible to human skill . . ."

"Thanks!" I murmured, lying back on my bed again. "You are very good! I will think over what you say; though to tell you the truth, it seems to me quite as agreeable to be mad as sane in this monotonous world!"

He moved away from me to the table, where he sat down and wrote a prescription. I noted his appearance drowsily,—his sleek head, his well-fitting clothes,—the clean, pale, business-looking hand that guided the pen.

"*Voyons!*" I said, with a laugh,—"In all the range of your experience, did you

ever know an *absintheur* give up Absinthe? —even for the sake of 'duty and conscience'?"

He made no answer—he merely took up his hat, looked into the crown of it, bowed slightly, and took his departure.

A couple of weeks later on I was able to rise from my bed and crawl about again, and then it was that I found I was getting very short of money. My illness had cost me dear;—and I soon recognized that I should have to vacate my already poor apartment for one in some still cheaper and lower quarter. And I should have to do something for a living,—something, if it were but to beg for pence,—something even to obtain the necessary coins wherewith to purchase Absinthe. And one day, the weather being warm and sunny, I wandered into the Tuileries gardens and sat there, drowsily pondering on my own fate,—turning over the *pros* and *cons* of my miserable existence, and wondering what I should do to enable myself to live on. For worthless

as my life was,—worthless as I knew it to be,—I did not want to die,—I had not the necessary courage for that.

All at once like a rainbow of hope in a dark sky, there came to me the thought of Héloïse St. Cyr. Her fair and saintly presence seemed to pass, like a holy vision, before my sight,—and in my weak and debilitated state, the tears rushed to my eyes at the mere remembrance of her womanly truth and sweetness. Her voice, with its soft musical cadence seemed to float invitingly towards me,—nay,—I even fancied I heard the melodies of the violin she played so well, echoing faintly through the quiet air. I would go to her, I thought ;—would go, while I was crushed and broken down by the effects of my illness ; I would tell her all and plead for pity—for pardon ; —I would ask her to help me,—to save me from myself as only a good woman, God's angel on earth, ever can save a wretched man. And if she wished—if she commanded it — I would, — yes ! — I would

actually give up *absinthe* for her sake,—she should do with me what she would,—my wrecked life should be hers to dominate as she chose!

I rose up hastily, the tears still in my eyes,—and, leaning on a stick, for I was unable to walk without this support, I made my way with painfully slow steps towards the house of the De Charmilles. For all I knew the Countess and her niece might not be there,—they might have gone south for the winter. Still I felt that I must make an attempt, however futile, to see the only creature in the world who could, just at this juncture in my life, possibly even now be my saviour!

There were a great many people in the streets; everything looked bright and suggestive of pleasure,—the sunshine was brilliant, and the Champs Elysées were crowded with happy children sporting in the merry-go-rounds, and driving in the pretty goat-carriages, while their nurses and governesses mounted tender guard over

their innocent pastimes. I thought I had never seen Paris wear such a beautiful aspect;—a gentle mood was upon me,—I was sorrowful yet not despairing,—and though I was not actually cognizant of any poignant remorse for all the evil I had wrought I was conscious of a faint, yearning desire to atone. The last little spark of my better nature had roused itself into a feeble glow, and it kindled within me a sense of shame; a touch of late—and useless—penitence. I little knew how soon this nobler fire was to be quenched in darkness!—I little guessed what swift vengeance the wild Absinthe-witch can take on any one of her servitors who dares to dream of disputing her inexorable authority!

And by-and-by my laggard, faltering movements brought me to the familiar street,—the well-known stately mansion where I had so often been a welcome guest in happier days. The gates stood open,—but there was something strange about the aspect of the place that made me rub my

eyes and stare in vaguely stupid wonder,—what dark delusion had seized upon me now? The gates stood open, as I said,—and the circumstance that awoke in me such dull confusion and amazement was, that the portals of the hall-door were also flung wide apart, and the whole entrance was hung with draperies of black, festooned with white; heavy draperies that trailed mournfully like drooping banners, down to the ground below. Again I rubbed my eyes violently—I could not believe their testimony—they had so often deceived me. Was this a spectral hallucination? I advanced hesitatingly—I ascended the steps—I approached those dreary black hangings and touched them;—they were real,—and the hall beyond them was dark and solemn, the gleam of a few tall candles sparkling here and there like tapers in a tomb. No one noticed me, though there were many people passing in and out — they were dressed in black and moved softly,—they pressed handkerchiefs to their eyes and wept

as they went to and fro ;—many of them carried flowers. Gradually the meaning of the sombre scene dawned upon me,—this was what is called in France a "*chapelle ardente*" — a laying-out of the dead in state,—an opening of the doors to all comers, friends or foes, that they may be enabled to look their last on the face they loved or hated! A "*chapelle ardente*"—yes !—but for whom ? Who was dead ? The answer flashed upon me at once,—it was the widowed and unhappy Comtesse de Charmilles who had gone the way of all flesh,—of course !—it must be she ! Bereft of husband and child, what more natural than that she should have wearied of life, and longed to join her lost loved ones !—and fresh tears sprang to my eyes as I realized the certainty that this was so. Poor soul !—I remembered her quiet grace and reposeful dignity—her charming manners,—her queenly yet sweet maternal ways —her invariable kindness and gentleness to me when I was her son-in-law in prospec-

tive. And now she was no more,—she had sunk down, broken-hearted, to the grave,—and in her death I felt that I too had the most cruel share!

"Wretched man that I am!" I thought, as I leaned feebly against the great staircase, up and down which the visitors were going and returning. "I am accursëd!—and only Héloïse can free me of my curse!"

Mastering my emotion by an effort, I addressed a maid-servant who passed me at the moment.

"She is dead?" I asked in hushed accents.

"Alas, yes, monsieur! She is dead!"

And the girl broke into tears as she spoke, and hurried away.

I waited another minute or two,—then gathering up my strength, I ascended the stairs slowly with the rest of the silent, tip-toe-treading mourners. The smell of fresh incense, mingling with the heavy perfume of lilies, was wafted towards me as I came nearer and nearer the chamber which was

now turned into a high altar for death's service,—a glimmer of white hangings caught my eyes,—white flowers,—all white! Strange!—white, pure white, was for those who died young! And the pretty phraseology of an old French madrigal passed through my memory involuntarily;—

"Comme la rose quitte la branche du rosier
La jeunesse quitte la vie;
Celles qui mourront jeune,
On les couvrira de fleurs nouvelles;
Et du milieu de ces fleurs
Elles s'élèveront vers le ciel,
Comme le passe-vole du calice des roses!"

Another step,—another — hush — hush! What beautous still-faced angel was that, pillowed among pale cyclamens and tranced in frozen sleep? . . .

I dashed aside the silken hangings,—like a madman I rushed forward. . .

"*Héloïse!*" I shrieked. "*Héloïse!*"

* * * * *

Dead—dead! Grovelling on the ground in wild agony, I clutched handfuls of the flowers with which her funeral couch was

strewn—I groaned—I sobbed—I raved!—I could have killed myself then in the furious frenzy of my horror and despair!

"Héloïse!" I cried again and again. "Héloïse! Wake! Speak to me! Curse me! Love me! Oh God, God! you are not dead!—not dead! Héloïse!—Héloïse!"

The fair face seemed to smile serenely. "I am safe!" was its mute expression. "Safe from evil—safe from sorrow,—safe from love—safe from *you!* I have escaped your touch,—your look—your voice—and all the bitterness of ever having known you! And being now grown wise in death I pardon—I pity you!—Leave me to rest in peace!"

Shaken by tearless sobs of mortal agony, I gazed distractedly upon that maiden image of sweet wisdom and repose;—the loose gold hair, unbound to its full rippling length, caught flickers from the sunlight through the window-pane,—the fringed white eyelids fast closed in eternal sleep were delicately indented as though some

angel's finger-tips had passed them down caressingly,—the waxen-hands were folded meekly across the bosom, where a knot of virgin lilies wept out fragrance in lieu of tears. Dead — dead! Why had Death taken her?—why had God wanted her—God, who has so many saints—why could He not have spared her to the earth which has so few! Dead!—and with her had died my last hope of good,—my last chance of rescue! And I buried my head again among the odorous funeral flowers and wept as I had never wept before,—as I shall never have sufficient heart or conscience in me to weep again!

Suddenly a hand touched me gently on the shoulder.

"Señor!"

The voice was that of a stranger,—the accent Spanish—and I looked up in sullen wrath,—who was it that dared thus to intrude upon my misery? . . . A man stood beside me,—a lithe, dark creature with soft brilliant brown eyes,—eyes that just then

were swimming in tears; his whole mobile face expressed emotion and sympathy—and in one hand he held—a violin.

"Señor"—he again murmured gently. "Let me entreat of you to restrain your grief! It alarms the people who come to render their last homage—it unnerves them! See you!—we are alone in this room—the others are afraid to enter. Pray, pray do not give way to such distraction!—she was happy in dying,—her health had declined for some time and she was glad to go,—and her death was beautiful,—it was the quiet falling asleep of innocence!"

His look, his words, his manner bewildered me.

"You saw her die?" I muttered confusedly. "You—you——"

"*Hélàs! pauvre enfant!* she passed away with her hand in mine!" he answered softly, and as he spoke, he took up a cluster of flowers from the couch, and, kissing them, laid them again in their former position.

I rose to my feet trembling violently, a sombre wrath gaining possession of my soul.

"And who *are* you?" I said. "Why are you here?"

"I am Valdez, the violinist," he replied, —and then I recollected,—this was the very "*maestro*" about whose performances Héloïse had used to be so enthusiastic. "I came hither because she sent for me," he continued. "I travelled all the way from Russia. She wanted me,—it was to give me this, before she died."

And he touched the violin he held,—her violin!—her chiefest treasure!—and she had bestowed it upon *him!*

A sickening suspicion arose in me and almost choked my utterance. What bond had there been between her—the dead Héloïse,—and this man, the musical puppet of a mob's capricious favour? What if she had not died innocent after all! . . .

"Were you her lover?" I demanded breathlessly.

He drew back amazed, with a gesture of mingled pain and hauteur.

"Her lover?—I? You can jest in the presence of death, monsieur? . . . I love art,—not women."

I stared at him in dubious anger. The dead girl before us held some secret hidden behind her closed eyes and set, smiling lips,—a secret I feverishly craved to fathom!

"But she," I said. "She must have loved you—to have given you *that!*"

And I pointed to the violin.

His dark face lightened into a grave smile,—a new and sudden interest flashed in his eyes. But he was otherwise unmoved.

"I do not see that at all"—he murmured. "She knew I would value such a gift,—that it would be more precious to me than to any one else in the world,—and that is why she was so anxious I should have it. Still, . . . she may have loved me,—secretly, as many other women have loved me,—I never thought of that!—yet—it is possible! It

was her music I cared for,—she played divinely!—and her violin, *this* violin—is a treasure beyond price! Ah! what sounds I will invoke from it! I laid it by her side to-day,—I had a fancy that some message from the other world might steal into it from her dead presence, and make its tone more deep, more thrilling, more absolutely perfect and pure!"

I advanced upon him in rough haste,—something in my eyes must have startled him for he recoiled slightly—but I went close up and laid my burning hands upon his shoulders.

"Be silent!" I gasped hoarsely. "Is this the place or time to talk your art-jargon? Have you no soul, except for sound? She loved you!—I feel it,—I know it—I am sure of it!—she loved you!—yes!—you never knew it I dare say,—men never do know these things! But see what she has done for you!—she has left her spirit with you—there—in that violin you hold!—her graceful fancies, her noble thoughts,

her tenderness, her sweetness—you have it all imprisoned there,—all to come forth at your bidding! When you play, she, Héloïse, will speak to you, caress you, teach you, help you, comfort you!—and I—I hate you for it—I hate you! For now I know she never would have pitied me,—never would have loved me again as she loved me once,—for in dying, she had no thought for me—she only thought of you—you, on whom Fortune smiles from day to day! Judge then how I hate you!—how I cannot do otherwise than hate you!—for she has given you all—and left me nothing! Nothing! . . . my God!—nothing!"

And with a savage cry I flung him from me and rushed from the room, not daring to look again on the white angel-face of that dead woman who smiled with such triumphant sweetness, with such indifferent coldness, on my desperate despair! I saw people make terrified way for me as I ran,—I heard some one exclaim that I was mad with grief!—but I paid no heed,—whether

I was recognized or not I neither knew nor cared! Out into the street I plunged, as it were, into the thick of the passers-by . . . could I not lose myself, I wildly thought!—could I not obliterate myself from sight and sense and speech and action?—was there not some deep wide open grave into which I could fall swooningly and there be covered in before I had time to suffer or struggle? Oh, for a sudden death without pain!—oh, for a swift cessation to this scorching bitterness in my blood—this heavy aching of my heart! Sick to the very dregs of misery, I raved for days in feverish agony,—agony that was blind, desperate, hopeless, helpless, cureless! What spectres stood beside me then!—what horrid voices shouted in my ears!—how strange and loathly the half-formed creatures that followed me and mouthed at me, gibbering in uncouth speech scarcely intelligible!—how the murdered man Silvion came and looked at me as at some foul thing!—how Pauline, fair and pale, with a dying sweetness in her smile,

drifted by me, finely fairy-like as a fleecy cloud in summer-time!—and, ah God! how the soft large eyes of Héloïse beamed piteous wonder and reproach upon me like bland stars shining solemnly on a criminal in his cell! Those eyes — those eyes! — they tortured me,—their mildness chilled me!—their pure and unimpassioned lustre shamed me!—they were angels' eyes, and their holy innocence scared and shook me to the soul! Oh, that horrible time!—oh those dreary, wild dark days and nights of utter loss and blank wretchedness!—that frightful space of torment in which every nerve in my body seemed torn and wrenched by devils!—how I was able to live through it, I cannot tell!

And when, like all other things, it wore itself out at last,—when I grew calm, with the dreadful calmness of sheer stupefaction and exhaustion,—then—then I realized it all, and my Absinthe-witch gave me a clue to the whole mystery! *There was a God!* —yes! actually a God!—a great, terrific, cruel, unforgiving, awful Being, and He in

all His omnipotence had set Himself against me! He whose proud Will evolved the growing Universe,—He had arrayed His mighty forces of Heaven and Hell against one miserable atom of earth!—and the Titanic wheels of Life, Time and Eternity were all whirled into motion to grind me, a worm, down to destruction! One would think it a waste of power on God's part!—but He would seem to be most particular in trifles. Note how carefully he tints the rose, from deepest crimson to tenderest pink!—how recklessly He drops the avalanche on a village full of harmless souls asleep! What infinite pains he has bestowed on the burnish and hue of the peacock's plume,—all to make of a useless bird with a harsh voice, a perfect marvel of colour and brilliancy!—and what a deaf ear he turns to the shriek of the murderer's victim! Who will account for these things in Nature's plan? It is useless for any good pious folks to tell me that my miseries are my own fault. What have I done, I pray you, save

drink Absinthe? I have poisoned my brain and blood!—well—but how ridiculously small the seed from which such grim results have sprung! *I* am not to blame if the Creator has done His work badly,—if He has made the brain so delicate and the spirit so volatile that its quality and comprehension vanish at the touch of—*Wormwood.* Nothing but wormwood,—it is a plant as well as a metaphor,—and God made it! God gives us plenty of it in our lives, as well as in our liquor!—and the preachers tell us bitterness is very wholesome! Everything is God's work—even evil,—and when, with the aid of my life's elixir, I grasped this fact thoroughly, I saw it was no use offering any more resistance to fate. For I was left without the smallest vestige of hope,—the little spark of penitence in me had been revived too late,—and throughout the whole drama, no one had thought of *me!* Silvion Guidèl had died thinking of Pauline,—Pauline had drowned, with the name of her lover on her lips,—and Héloïse, even

Héloïse, had bestowed her last word, her last looks, not on me, but on a comparative stranger—a mere musical virtuoso! God's meaning was made plain! I was left to my own devices,—it was shown me distinctly that my life was without interest to any one but myself. I accepted the hint. As it was decreed, so it must be,—and I did as André Gessonex had done before me,—killed the last vestige of my flickering conscience in me with a final blow,—and became—*what I am!*

* * * * *

L'ENVOI.

And what am I? My dear friends, I have told you,—an *absintheur!* *Absintheur, pur et simple!—voilà tout!* I am a thing more abject than the lowest beggar that crawls through Paris whining for a sou!—I am a slinking, shuffling beast, half monkey, half man, whose aspect is so vile, whose body is so shaken with delirium, whose eyes are so murderous, that if you met me by chance in the day-time, you would probably shriek for sheer alarm! But you will not see me thus—daylight and I are not friends. I have become like a bat or an owl in my hatred of the sun!—it shone gloriously when Héloïse was lying dead,—I have not forgotten that! . . . At night I live;—at night I creep out with the other obscene

things of Paris, and by my very presence, add fresh pollution to the moral poisons in the air! I gain pence by the meanest errands,—I help others to vice,—and whenever I have the opportunity I draw down weak youths, mothers' darlings, to the brink of ruin, and topple them over—if I can! For twenty francs, you can purchase me body and soul,—for twenty francs I will murder or steal,—all true *absintheurs* are purchasable! For they are the degradation of Paris,—the canker of the city—the slaves of a mean insatiable madness which nothing but death can cure. Death!—that word reminds me,—I have the means of death in my power and yet—I cannot die! Strange, is it not? . . . A little while ago I came upon one of my class in dire distress,—he had been a noted chemist in his day,—but he is nothing now—nothing but an *absintheur*, who suffers grinding physical tortures when he has no money wherewith to purchase what has become the emerald life-blood of his veins. I found him in a

fit of rage, rolling in his garret and howling imprecations on all mankind—he was just in the mood to do what I asked of him. It was a trifle!—a mere friendly exchange of poisons! I gave him the *Absinthe* for which he craved so desperately,—and in return, he prepared for me a little phial of liquid, crystal-clear as a diamond, harmless-looking as spring-water,—a small draught, which if once I have the courage to swallow, will give me an instant exit from the world! Imagine it!—I shall not suffer I am told,—first a giddiness—then a darkness,—and that is all. I take it out often—that little glittering flask of death,—I look at it,—I wonder at it,—for it is the key to the Eternal Secret,—but I dare not drink its contents! I dare not, I tell you!—I am afraid—horribly afraid!—any condemned criminal is braver than I! For the longer I live, the more I realize that this death is not the actual end,—there is something afterwards!—and it is the Afterwards that appals me.

Life is precious!—yes, even my life, surrounded with phantoms, darkened with delirium, enfeebled by vice and misery as it is, it is precious! I know its best and worst,—its value and worthlessness;—I can measure it and scorn it,—I can laugh at it and love it!—I can play with myself and it as a tiger plays with its torn and bleeding prey!—and knowing it, I cling to it—I do not want to be hurled into what I do *not* know! Some day perhaps—when a blind, dark fury overcomes my brain,—when spectres clutch at me and sense and memory reel into chaos, then I may drink the fatal draught I bear about with me;—but I shall be truly mad when I do!—too mad to realize my own act! I shall never part with life consciously, or while the faintest glimmer of reason remains in me,—be sure of that! I love life—especially life in Paris!—I love to think that I and my compeers in Absinthe are a blot and a disgrace on the fairest city under the sun!—I love to meditate on the crass stupidity of

our rulers, who though gravely forbidding the sale of poisons to the general public, permit the free enjoyment of Absinthe everywhere!—I watch with a scientific interest the mental and moral deterioration of our young men, and I take a pride in helping them on to their downfall!—I love to pervert ideas, to argue falsely, to mock at virtue, to jeer at faith, and to instil morbid sentiments into the minds of those who listen to me;—and I smile as I see how "*La revanche!*" is dying out, and how content the absinthe-drinker is to crouch before the stalwart, honest, beer-bred Teuton! It is a grand sight!—and we are a glorious people!—just the sort of beings who are constituted to caper and make mouths at "*perfide Albion*"—and capture mild English tourists in mistake for German spies! All is for the best!—Let us drink and dream and dance and carouse and let the world go by! Let us make a mere empty boast of honour,—and play off sparkling witticisms against purity,—let us

encourage our writers and dramatists to pen obscenities,—our painters to depict repulsive nudities—our public men talk loud inanities —our women to practice all the wiles of wantons and *cocottes!* But with this, let us never forget to be enthusiastic when we are called upon to sing the "Marseillaise." How does it go?—

"Amour sacré de la patrie
Conduis, soutiens nos bras vengeurs,—
Liberté, liberté cherie
Combats avec tes defenseures!
Sous nos drapeaux que la Victoire
Accoure à tes mâles accents
Que tes ennemis expirants
Voient ton triomphe et notre gloire!"

Just so! Let us always glorify Liberty, though we are slaves to a Vice! Lift up your voices, good countrymen, in chorus!—

"Aux armes citoyens! Formez vos battaillons!
Marchons! qu'un sang impur abreuve nos sillons!"

Bravo!—Only let us roar this loudly enough, with frantic tossing of arms and waving of banners,—with blare of trumpets, with tears and emotional embraces, and we

shall perhaps by noise and *blague*, if by nothing else, convince ourselves if we cannot convince other nations, that France is as great, as pure and as powerful as she was in her Lily-days of old! We can shut our eyes to her decaying intelligence, her beaten condition,—her cheap cynicism, her passive atheism, her gross materialism,—we can cheat ourselves into believing that a nation can thrive on Poison,—we can do anything so long as we hold fast to the Marseillaise and the Tricolor! Mere symbols!—and we scarcely trust them,—but nevertheless they are our last chance of safety! France is France still,—but the conqueror's tread is on her soil!—and we—we have borne it and still can bear it!—we have forgotten—we forget! What should we want with Victory?—We have ABSINTHE!

THE END.

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